LINDSAY BUROKER'S
DRAGON BLOOD
BOOKS 1-3 SET
LINDSAY BUROKER
BALANCED ON THE BLADE'S EDGE
LINDSAY BUROKER
DEATH MAKER
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The Dragon Blood Collection Books 1-3

by Lindsay Buroker

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Author's Note

Thank you for checking out the first three Dragon Blood books! I originally wrote *Balanced on the Blade's Edge* out of a desire to pen a fun fantasy romance with a few steampunk elements. I never intended to turn it into a series. But I enjoyed writing about Ridge and Sardelle and also about their world. I found I wasn't ready to stop at one book.

I created a new hero and heroine for *Deathmaker* and wrote a second adventure that could be read independently from the first—but I did bring Ridge and Sardelle back to help out in the last third. Oh, and let's not forget Jaxi, the sentient soulblade. She insists on being a part of everyone's story.

When it was time to write the third book, I put everybody together and sent them off on a new quest: *Blood Charged*. I hope you'll enjoy spending time with these characters.

Balanced on the Blade's Edge

Colonel Ridge Zirkander isn't the model of military professionalism—he has a tendency to say exactly what's on his mind, and his record has enough demerits to wallpaper the hull of an airship—but as the best fighter pilot in the Iskandian army, he's used to a little leniency from his superiors. Until he punches the wrong diplomat in the nose and finds himself issued new orders: take command of a remote prison mine in the inhospitable Ice Blades Mountains. Ridge has never been in charge of anything larger than a flier squadron—what's he supposed to do with a frozen fortress full of murderers and rapists? Not to mention the strange woman who shows up right before he arrives…

Sardelle Terushan wakes from three hundred years in a mage stasis shelter, only to realize that she is the last of the Referatu, the sorcerers who once helped protect Iskandia from conquerors. Their subterranean mountain community was blown up in a treacherous sneak attack by soldiers who feared their power. Everyone Sardelle ever knew is dead, and the sentient soulblade she has been bonded to since her youth is buried in the core of the mountain. Further, what remains of her home has been infested by bloodthirsty miners commanded by the descendants of the very soldiers who destroyed her people.

Sardelle needs help to reach her soulblade—her only link to her past and her last friend in the world. Her only hope is to pretend she's one of the prisoners while trying to gain the commander's trust. But lying isn't her specialty, especially when the world has changed so much in the intervening centuries, and if Colonel Zirkander figures out who she truly is, he'll be duty-bound to sentence her to the only acceptable punishment for sorcerers: death.

Chapter 1

Colonel Ridge Zirkander had walked the hall to General Ort's office so many times he suspected his boots were responsible for the threadbare state of the drab gray carpet runner. The two privates standing guard on either side of the door were too well trained to exchange knowing smirks, but that didn't mean gossip of this meeting wouldn't be all over the citadel by noon. It wouldn't be the first time. Fortunately, uniforms only held awards and not demerits.

"Morning, gents." Ridge stopped before the door. He eyed the privates' rifles—they had the new lever-action repeating models—but neither man looked like he had been given orders to keep visitors out. Too bad. "How's the general's mood today?"

"Tense, sir."

"That applies to most days, doesn't it?" He didn't expect an answer—privates weren't encouraged to chat about officers after all, at least not where said officers might overhear—but the younger one grinned and responded.

"A week ago last Thursday, it elevated to agitated, sir."

"Glad I was in the air that day then." Ridge thumped the fellow on the shoulder and reached for the doorknob.

The private's grin widened. "We heard about the battle cruiser, sir. That was marvelous. I wish I could have seen it."

"Taking down the supply ship was more of a victory for us, but I suppose that didn't come with the added excitement of being shot at by cannons."

"I'd love to hear about it, sir." The private's eyes gleamed with hope.

"Might be at Rutty's later," Ridge said, "if the general doesn't send me down to the kitchen to chop vegetables with the recruits."

He walked in without knocking. Mounds of paperwork were heaped on General Ort's desk, but the man was gazing out the window overlooking the harbor, his weathered hands clasped behind his back. Merchant, fishing, and military vessels sailed to and from the docks, but, as always, Ridge's eye was drawn to the dragon fliers lined up on the butte on the southern end. Their sleek bronze hulls, propellers,

and guns gleamed under the morning sun, beckoning him to return. His squadron was out there, overseeing maintenance and repairs, and waiting for him to bring them news. He hoped this ego-trouncing session would also include the delivery of new orders.

When the general didn't turn around right away, Ridge flopped into a plush leather chair in front of the desk, flinging his leg over the armrest.

"Morning, General. I got your message. What can I do for you this fine day?" Ridge nodded toward the blue sky above the harbor, a sky clear of enemy airships as well as clouds.

Ort turned, his customary scowl deepening as he waved at Ridge's dangling boot. "No, no, have a seat. I insist."

"Thank you, General. These chairs do lend themselves to lounging in comfort." Ridge patted the soft leather. "If anyone ever succeeds in foisting an office on me, I hope it'll be furnished just as finely."

"Seven gods, Ridge. Every time you see me, I wonder anew how you got so many bars on your collar."

"It's a mystery to me as well, sir."

Ort pushed a hand through his short gray hair, sat down, and pulled out a folder. Ridge's folder, though he had to have it memorized by now, all of its three inches of thickness. "You're forty years old, Colonel. Are you ever going to grow up?"

"I've been told it's more likely I'll be shot down first."

Ort folded his hands across the folder without opening it. "Tell me what happened."

"In regard to what, sir?" Ridge asked. He knew perfectly well, but he had long ago learned not to volunteer information that might incriminate him.

"You don't *know*?" Ort's ever-present scowl deepened until the corners of his mouth were in danger of falling off his chin.

"Well, my squad's been on the ground four days. Could be a lot of things."

"According to my report, you broke Diplomat Serenson's nose, bruised his ribs, and threatened to rip off his penis. Any of that sound familiar?"

"Oh," Ridge said, nodding. "Yes, it does. Although, I believe it was his flesh pole I threatened to rip off. There were ladies present, and some find anatomically correct terms too blunt for polite company."

The general's jaw ground back and forth several times before he managed a response. "Explain."

"That slimy turf kisser had cornered Lieutenant Ahn and was groping her and trying to usher her outside. She was about to slam a fist into his face herself, but I stepped in, figuring she might not appreciate your plush leather chairs the way I do." Actually, his ace

lieutenant, who had nearly as many kills on the side of her flier as he did this year, had been wearing the most conflicted expression, like she might have actually let Serenson drag her outside and paw her up, since he was such an important delegate. To the hells with that—nobody's uniform required *that* kind of sacrifice.

"Breyatah's Breath, Ridge, couldn't you have defended your officer without starting an international incident?"

Possibly, but he wouldn't have found it nearly as satisfying. Besides… "International incident? We're already at war with the Cofah, and this was just a reminder of why we broke away from their rule in the first place. They think they can have anything they want. Well, they can't. Not my country, and *not* one of my people."

Ort sighed and leaned back in his chair. "It's… good to know you care beneath all your irrepressible impudence, but the king was at my throat like an attack dog this morning. This is serious, Ridge. Serenson wants you sent to Magroth."

Ridge snorted. His crime hadn't been *that* severe. Only convicts went to the Magroth Crystal Mines, convicts who would have otherwise been marched out to the firing squad. Very few thought the sentence of life in the mines with no chance of parole was an improvement.

The general pulled a sheet of paper out of the top of Ridge's file and laid it on the desk. "You leave in the morning."

"I—what?" For the first time, real unease settled into the pit of his stomach. He had left his blessed dragon figurine dangling in the cockpit of his flier, but maybe he should have brought it along, or at least rubbed its belly for luck that morning… "That's not very damned funny, sir."

The general's humorless gray eyes bored into Ridge like overzealous drills. "The king agrees."

The king? The king wouldn't send him to his death. He was too valuable to the war effort. Ridge started to shake his head, but halted, realization coming as his gaze dropped to the typed sheet of paper. Orders. They weren't sending him as a criminal, but as an officer. A contingent of men guarded the secret mines, the location known only to those high up in command—and those who had been stationed there.

"You want me to guard miners, sir? That's… the infantry's job and one for a bunch of enlisted men." Sure, there had to be a few officers there to run administration, but there couldn't possibly be a posting for a colonel. "Or are you demoting me along with this… reassignment?" Ridge almost gagged on the last word. Reassigned! Him? All he knew how to do was fly and shoot; that's all he had done since graduating from flight school. He was only vaguely aware of the

location of the mines, but knew they were in the mountains, hundreds of miles from the coast, from the front lines.

"Demotion? No, not a demotion. Read the orders, Ridge." Ort smiled for the first time in the meeting, the kind of smile a bully wears after pummeling some scrawny kid on the brisk-ball court. "The king and I talked about this at great length this morning."

Ridge picked up the sheet and skimmed. Yes, a reassignment. To the position… He lowered the sheet. "Fortress *commander*?"

"I believe that's what it says, yes." Ort was still smiling. Ridge preferred his scowl.

"That's… that's a position for a general." Or at least someone with experience leading battalions of troops, not to mention the administration background a man should have. All Ridge had commanded were squadrons of smart, cocky officers not unlike him. What was he supposed to do with a bunch of infantry soldiers? Not to mention the gods knew how many murdering prisoners that roamed the tunnels?

"In times of war, it's not uncommon for less experienced officers to be forced to work in positions above their pay grade."

"What happened to the current commander?" Ridge muttered, imagining some poor general with a miner's pickaxe driven into his forehead.

"General Bockenhaimer is due to retire this winter. He'll be extremely grateful to be relieved early."

"I'll bet."

Ridge stared down at the orders, his eyes blurring. He barely managed to check the date. A one-year assignment. Who would command his team while he was gone? Who would pilot his flier? He had always thought… he had been led to assume—no, people had told him, damn it—he was indispensable out there. The war wasn't over—if anything, this year had seen more fighting than any of the previous four. How could they send him off to some remote gods-forgotten outpost in the mountains?

"I know this is hard for you to stomach, Ridge, but I actually believe it's for the best."

Ridge shook his head. It was all he could do. For once, he had no words, no quip with which to respond.

"You're an amazing pilot, Ridge. You know that. Everyone knows that. But there's more to being an officer than shooting things. This will force you to mature as a soldier and as a man." Ort hitched a shoulder. "Or it'll kill you."

Ridge snorted.

Ort waved a hand. "You have your orders. Dismissed."

Ridge left the chair, giving it and the harbor out the window a long

look before he headed for the door. Grounded. For a year. How was he going to survive?

"Oh, and Colonel?" the general said as Ridge walked for the door.

Ridge paused, hoping this had all been a joke designed to teach him a lesson. "Yes?"

"Pack warm clothes. Autumn is just about over in the mountains." The general's smile returned. "And Magroth is at twelve thousand feet."

A lesson, indeed.

. . . . .

Sardelle woke with a start, her heart pounding out of her chest. Nothing except blackness surrounded her. Scrapes and scuffs reached her ears, and memories rushed over her: the sounds of the explosion, being ordered to the safety chamber, climbing into one of the mage shelters and activating it, then gasping in terror as the rock crashed down all around her, obliterating her world.

She patted around, feeling for the smooth walls of the sphere, but they had disappeared. Only rough, cold rock met her probing fingers. The scrapes were getting louder. Her colleagues coming to help? But they would burn away the rock or move it by magical means, not scrape through it with pickaxes, wouldn't they? Maybe the sorcerers of the Circle were too busy fighting back their attackers and had sent mundane workers.

Sardelle?

The telepathic query filled her mind with relief. Jaxi. Had her soulblade been buried in the rock somewhere as well? There hadn't been time to run and grab the sword when the mountain had started quaking.

I'm here.

Thank the gods. You've been hibernating for so long. You can't believe how lonely it's been. There's a limit to how many conversations you can start with rocks.

I assume that means you're buried too. The soft scrapes were getting closer, and a pinprick of light pierced the darkness a few feet away.

Deeper than you. You left me in the basement training rooms, remember?

Of course I remember. That was just this morning. As I recall, you were enjoying having that handsome young apprentice oil your blade.

Sardelle waited, expecting a retort, but a long silence filled her mind—and the pinprick of light grew larger. When Jaxi finally responded, it was a soft, *Sardelle?*

Yes… ?

It wasn't this morning.

When, then?

Three hundred years ago.

She snorted. *That's funny, Jaxi. Very funny. How long has it really been?*

Those army sappers were utterly effective in collapsing the mountain. They were shielded somehow, and our people didn't sense them. For that… we died. En masse. The mage shelter saved your life, but it was programmed not to take you out of stasis until favorable conditions returned to the outside. In this case, oxygen and a way for a human being to escape without being crushed.

That part, Sardelle believed. She remembered Jetia sending out the telepathic announcement—more of a mental shriek of fear—about the sappers seconds before the explosions had gone off, before the rocks had started crumbling. But… three hundred *years*?

If it makes you feel better, I've been conscious for all of those years, watching this mountain and hoping someone with mage powers would wander by, so I could call out for the person to retrieve me. I did manage to mind link with a couple of shepherds and prospectors, but they found my presence in their heads alarming, if you can imagine that. They ran off the mountain shrieking. Little matter. I estimate I'm under a thousand meters of solid rock. There would be no way for a mundane to reach me. Even you… I would appreciate it if you would find a way to get me out, but moving that much rock would be too much for you without me.

Is that so? Sardelle managed to lace the thought with indignation, though it was more a habitual reaction to Jaxi's teasing than a true objection. And this *had* to be teasing. Unlike with most sorcerers, who preserved their souls after they had lived many decades, Jaxi had died young of a rare disease, choosing to infuse her essence in the soulblade before passing. Despite having had several wielders and existing in the sword for hundreds of years, Jaxi retained her teenage sense of humor, often playing pranks on Sardelle.

Not this time, my friend.

I don't—

You'll see in a moment. You better pay attention to your surroundings. The world has changed. Our people were destroyed, and those who remain fear anything that smells of magic. A while back, at the base of the mountain, I saw a girl who had been accused of being a witch weighted down with stones and drowned in a lake. Do not use your powers where they can be observed.

Sardelle wanted to argue, wanted to catch Jaxi in a lie. Mostly she wanted for everything to be all right, for all of her kith and kin to have survived and for this all to be a joke. The scrapes had continued, and more light—the flickering of candle or perhaps lantern flames—seeped into her niche. Her eyes couldn't yet tell her who was out

there, so she stretched out with her senses… and knew right away the two men clawing at the rock with picks and shovels were strangers. Though she was often off on missions, she knew all the sorcerers and mundanes who worked in Galmok Mountain, the seat of culture, government, and teaching for those with the gift.

Voices reached Sardelle's ears, rough and slightly accented.

"… see something, Tace?"

"Not sure. Maybe a room? There's a gap in the rocks up here."

"Maybe there's a crystal." Rock shifted, pebbles raining down a slope. "That would be cracking—they haven't found one all year. We'll get a pint if we bring one up. The general might even invite us for dinner."

They shared chortles at that notion.

Some of the words and pronunciation have changed over the generations, but you're fortunate the language is the same. You'll be able to communicate with them without entering their minds. Jaxi was silent for a moment, but Sardelle sensed the unease through their link. *Actually… I'd stay out of their minds altogether if I were you.*

Telepathic intrusion without invitation is forbidden except in emergencies, Sardelle thought. The mantra was one of the early ones in the Texts of the Referatu, something Jaxi surely knew as well as she.

If being buried alive in rubble for centuries doesn't count as an emergency, I'll cede myself to a doddering geriatric to be used as a cane for the rest of my existence.

Sardelle sighed. *I'll… consider your point.*

Finally enough rock fell away that Sardelle could make out the men. Her saviors, whether they knew it or not.

They don't. This is your opportunity for escape, but you'll have to be very careful.

I'm not leaving without you.

A lantern lifted to the hole, one that was now more than a foot wide. A moment later, a man's face came into view, his skin caked with grime, a matted mustache and beard hanging to his chest, his greasy dark hair held back from his eyes by a dusty bandana.

"There's something in here," he said to his comrade. "I see cloth, and, er…"

"Greetings," Sardelle said. "Tace, was it?"

Surprise widened the man's eyes, and he stumbled out of view. An auspicious beginning.

"What was that?" his comrade asked.

"There's a girl in there," Tace blurted.

"You tugging on my shovel? There's no girls down here."

"I'm a woman," Sardelle said, "and I'd be obliged if you dug me the rest of the way out of here." She glimpsed a tunnel behind the men.

She could handle the rock barricade in her own way, but Jaxi's warning trumpeted in her mind. *They fear anything that smells of magic.*

"A woman," Tace whispered. "A woman down here."

"How'd she get in there?"

"I don't care." More rocks fell away as the men worked at them with renewed vigor. "There ain't no soldiers 'cept back at the cages. They ain't gonna hear nothing. She can be ours."

And with those words—and the burst of lust that emanated from Tace like heat from an inferno—Sardelle came to understand Jaxi's warning.

"What if she's uglier than your grandma?"

"Don't care. Last time I tried to get with a girl, that nasty Big Bretta drove me out of the barracks like I was diseased. This is a prayer answered."

A prayer? What kind of man prayed to what kind of god for a woman to rape? Or maybe the deluded miner thought she would willingly jump into his arms because he had dug her out? No, he wasn't even thinking that—he was simply consumed with lust like a man digging toward a golden vein. She hadn't delved into his thoughts—and wasn't a gifted enough telepath to do so without alerting him anyway—but his emotions were on the surface, so strong she would have had to erect a barrier around herself to keep from sensing them.

More rock fell away. If she stepped to the front of the niche the mage shelter had left when it dissipated, she could have reached the men, had them pull her out, but she hung back, considering her options. Handling a would-be rapist wasn't a difficult matter if she could use her powers, but dare she? There were only the two men in the tunnel, but she sensed others in a maze of mines that snaked around inside the mountain. She wouldn't kill these two to keep them from divulging her presence. That was the sort of usage of power that had scared the mundanes into the sneak attack that had brought this mountain down.

Sardelle swam around Tace's overpowering emotions, trying to get a sense of the second man's state of mind. Might he be more reasonable? Someone to whom she could appeal? Her hope was squashed by her first brush with him. A darkness hovered about him, and she had the impression of a different sort of lust, of someone who liked to hurt, to cut with knives, to see pain on another's face. He would kill his comrade Tace as happily as work with him, if he could get away with it, and he would kill her too.

Sardelle drew back, her heart racing from the chilling contact. She snapped up her barriers to repel further brushes with their emotions.

I told you. Jax sounded sad rather than triumphant.

Enough rocks had been pulled away that the men could reach her now. They raised their lanterns for a good look. Sardelle stepped into the light, more because she wanted to scout the tunnel—and an escape route—than get closer to either of them. They smelled of sweat and grime, and even someone without the gift could have read the lechery on their faces. They were both large men, men who had been toiling here a long time and who had grown strong because of it. Through accident or design, they were blocking the narrow tunnel.

"It *is* a girl," Tace whispered, eyeing her from head to foot.

Sardelle had been dressed for the president's birthday celebration that morning—not that morning, but a morning hundreds of years in the past, she corrected, for she was gradually coming to believe Jaxi. She wore sandals and a dress fitting for a gala, not for tramping through tunnels. Her black hair hung about her shoulders, instead of being back in the braid she usually wore for work. Her pale green silk dress didn't show a lot of skin, but it did hug the contours of her body, and she realized the delicate collar had been ripped at some point in her mad race for safety. Both men's eyes locked onto that pale exposed flesh.

Tace grinned and stepped forward, reaching for her arm. Sardelle sensed Jaxi in the back of her mind, like a panther coiled to spring. The soulblade would attack their minds if she didn't find a way to defend herself.

Though rushed, Sardelle called upon a simple trick she had learned from a field healer, one she had used before when caught in difficult situations. She gave them rashes.

Their discomfort took a moment to register, and Sardelle feared she would have to use a more direct attack. Tace hauled her out of the rocks, and he pushed her against the cold stone wall, pressing his body against hers. He reached for his belt, but then he paused, a confused expression twisting his face. Behind him, his comrade was leaning on his pick with one hand and scratching his balls with the other.

Sardelle wanted to shrink away from Tace's hot breath washing her face, but she held her composure and merely raised an eyebrow. His hips shifted and the hand that had been about to unfasten his belt drifted lower, as he too suffered an overpowering itch.

The pickaxe the other man had been holding clanked to the ground, and he twisted and bucked, both of his hands now occupied. Tace's hands went back to his belt, but not with any intention of dropping his trousers to molest her. He stepped back, alternately scratching and investigating what was happening down there. Both men hobbled to the closest lantern for a better look, their trousers around their ankles.

At first, Sardelle only took a couple of steps, easing away slowly and silently, not wanting them to notice. When they didn't, she turned her walk into a jog, taking care not to let the sandals slap on the stone floor. She was already wishing she had worn her work leathers to the president's birthday, huge gala or not. The tunnel was dark and uneven, but her senses guided her, and she didn't conjure a light. She guessed that any other miners she met down there might be of similar mindsets to those two.

Good guess.

What is this place, Jaxi? Sardelle could handle a couple of dark-souled brutes, but what if… what if this was a representation of what the world had become? Her people's beautiful community destroyed, to be replaced with this? Her people… Her *friends*. Had they all died in that demolition? Tedzu, Malik, Yewlith? Her brother? Her parents? Even if they hadn't, they would have died in the years since. Was she all alone in the world now?

I'm here. For once, there was nothing flippant in Jaxi's response. She sent a feeling of compassion and support through their link. Sardelle appreciated it and wished it were enough. It wasn't. She was glad for the empty darkness of the tunnel, for tears were streaking down her cheeks and dripping from her chin.

It's been a mine for the last fifty years or so, and it's also a prison, Jaxi explained. *As to the world beyond this mountain? I don't know. I can't sense that far.*

I understand.

If it was a prison, maybe that meant some sort of sane person was in charge, someone she could talk to about… about what, she wasn't sure. How would she explain how she had come to be in the prison in the first place? And how could she escape and leave Jaxi buried under tons of rock? For that matter, how could she escape without investigating further and seeing if something remained of her people? Of her friends? Wasn't it possible that if she had made it to protection, others had too? Jaxi might simply not sense them because they were in the hibernation induced by the shelters.

I've checked. Hundreds of times. Trust me, I've checked. It's been a long, boring three centuries. I've also read all the books in the very dusty, very seldom-used prison library. If you ever need a summary of the titles, let me know.

Sardelle didn't appreciate the humor, not then. *When I was in the mage shelter, could you tell I was alive?*

Yes.

Sardelle struggled to find logic to refute Jaxi's certainty as to the others' passings. She didn't want to give up her hope. *We're linked. Maybe that was why you could sense me and—*

No.

Oh.

Light appeared ahead, lanterns hanging from nails in wooden supports. The dirt and rock that had been heaped against the walls in the area where the two men had accosted her was cleared here, and iron tracks ran along the ground, with ore carts here and there. More sections of track were stacked along one wall, the route waiting to be extended.

Sardelle slowed down, sensing more people ahead. Soon, the banging of carts and scraping of dirt reached her ears. With lanterns lighting this section, sneaking past miners would be difficult. That Tace had mentioned cages. Some sort of lift or tram system? He had also mentioned a guard. A guard could take her to whoever was in charge.

Someone jogged past an intersection ahead. Sardelle leaned against the wall between two lanterns, hoping the shadows hid her. Maybe she ought to wait in the darkness somewhere until the shift ended. But no, that wasn't an option. Sooner or later, her two rash victims were going to stop scratching themselves and seek medical attention, and she hadn't passed any branches in the tunnels.

She crept forward again. The bangs stopped, and it grew silent ahead. Had a lunch break been called? Maybe she would luck out.

Sardelle reached the corner and peeked around it. It wasn't an intersection, but an open chamber with lanterns hanging from a high ceiling as well as from the walls. Two men stood guard on either side of a metal cage on rails, a mesh door on the front side. The rails, as well as a cable attached to the top disappeared into a shaft angling upward at a diagonal. To the right of Sardelle's tunnel, at the back of the chamber, a big metal contraption with wheels and pulleys was bolted into the stone floor. A tram system. She had found her way out if she could get past those guards, or should she try talking to them?

Based on their tidy hair cuts, shaven faces, and clean uniforms—gray trousers with silver piping and navy blue jackets—they *looked* more likely to be reasonable than the thugs, but evil could walk in many guises. And it made her nervous that she didn't *recognize* those uniforms. They weren't the dark greens of the Iskandian Guard, the soldiers she had once worked with to defend the continent. More than that, she didn't recognize their weapons. Oh, she had seen things like the daggers they had sheathed at their waists and the studded maces on short chains hanging from their utility belts, but they bore firearms as well. Not the clumsy matchlock muskets she was familiar with—weapons many soldiers eschewed in favor of longbows or crossbows—but sleek black weapons the likes of which she had never seen. There was no ramrod attached to the top, nor were the men wearing powder

containers, as far as she could see.

They've replaced powder and musket balls with bullets that contain the charges within, Jaxi informed her. *Each rifle can hold six rounds, and that lever on the bottom is for loading them into the chamber. They can fire rapidly, one shot every half second or so.*

Sardelle was fortunate the guards were talking to each other in low voices, and not paying much attention to the tunnels that emptied into the chamber, for she had been staring at them for a long moment. Even without Jaxi's explanation, the firearms—the *rifles*—would have told her what she hadn't wanted to believe. This wasn't her century anymore.

Sorry.

I know. Sardelle blinked, fighting back tears again. This wasn't the time. She would find a place to cry for her lost friends—her lost *everything*—later.

She was on the verge of stepping out of the tunnel, when the guards stopped talking, one halting in the middle of the sentence. They stared down one of the passages, not Sardelle's. There were men gathering behind a bend down there, but she didn't think the guards could see them from their position. Were the miners up to something? She thought about warning the guards—maybe that would buy her some appreciation from them—but she was too late.

A boom came, not from the tunnel with the men, but from one to the left of the cage. The ground shivered beneath Sardelle's feet. Black smoke poured from the passage, while the men who had been gathering down the other tunnel charged from around the bend.

Sardelle opened her mouth to shout a warning, but the guards were already reacting. They stepped back into the mouth of the tram shaft for cover, then, each man facing toward one threat, dropped to one knee, their rifles coming up to aim. Nothing came out of the smoky passage, but the guard facing the advancing men started firing. Sardelle, sensing the bursts of pain as the bullets found targets, had a chilling demonstration of the rapid-fire capabilities of the weapons. Even so, three of the charging men reached the guards, and the skirmish switched to hand-to-hand combat. The brawny miners wielded their pickaxes and shovels with fury and power, but it soon became clear that the soldiers were well trained. They kept the tram cage at their backs, so their attackers couldn't maneuver behind them, and they swung the maces with precise, compact strokes, deflecting the picks and shovels, then smashing the studded metal heads into ribcages and jaws. The three miners soon lay unmoving on the ground.

Other people had crept toward the chamber from the other tunnels, though nobody had come as close to it as Sardelle had. They seemed

curious and hopeful rather than antagonistic. Harmlessly watching the show in case something happened in the miners' favor? A warning twanged her senses. They weren't *all* harmless.

"Look out," Sardelle called to alert them to a new assailant back in the direction of the smoke, the one who had originally lit the explosive.

A long cylinder with flame dancing at the end of a fuse sailed out of the tunnel, landing in front of the tram. One soldier fired at the man who had thrown it while the other stamped out the spitting fuse, as calmly as if he were grinding out a cigar stub.

All right, so they probably hadn't needed her warning…

One of the soldiers knelt to check the throats of the unconscious men. The other stared at her—she didn't try to hide, there being no point since she had given away her position, but she didn't step fully around the corner yet either. She wanted to see what their reaction to her was first.

"What are you doing down here, woman?"

Not exactly a thank you.

Sardelle was about to respond, but the second guard had taken out a knife and, without so much as a hesitation for a prayer or apology to whatever gods the miners worshipped, slit one of the unconscious men's throats.

"What are you doing?" Sardelle blurted, even as the soldier shifted to dispatch a second miner. "They're no threat now. Why kill them?"

The guard wielding the bloody dagger barely glanced at her. The other soldier strode toward her. "You people made your choice when you picked lives of crime, and these idiots made their final choice just now. There's no leniency here. We'd have to deal with that kind of thing every day if we were lenient." He jerked a thumb toward the men—toward the *bodies*, their life's blood flowing out onto the dark stone. Unlike Tace and his buddy, these miners were thin—too thin—with gaunt faces and hollowed cheekbones. They wouldn't have been a match for the soldiers under any circumstances.

Belatedly, his words sank in. You people. He thought she was one of them, one of the miners. Sardelle braced herself against the corner, ready to defend herself again if she had to. Would he try to slit *her* throat, as he had the others?

The soldier hung his mace on his belt and carried the rifle at his side rather than aiming at her, so she let him approach without reacting. She didn't sense kindly thoughts from him, but she didn't get the feeling that he meant to hurt her either.

"Come on, woman. You're not supposed to be down here. You know that." He gripped her arm and pulled her into the chamber, then frowned at her dress and sandals. "Or don't you? Did you come in

with the prisoners yesterday? Didn't you get the orientation?"

Orientation, as if this were some educational campus where people were directed how to find their classes and the dormitories… But if it could explain her presence down here, she would go with it. "No. No orientation."

The second soldier stalked down one of the tunnels, his dagger still in his grip as he went to check on the people they had already shot.

The man gripping her arm shook his head. "This way. Randask, I'm taking this one up to the women's area. I'll report this mess to the captain, who can report it to the general, who can sit in his office and drink his vodka and not care a yak's butt, like usual. You going to be all right down here?"

"Yeah." The man walked back into the chamber, his dagger awash in blood. Sardelle had a hard time tearing her eyes from it. He walked into the opposite tunnel, though she could sense that the man who had thrown the explosive was dead. "The peepers have gone back to work."

Yes, the watchers Sardelle had noticed earlier had drifted back down their tunnels. Clangs started up again in the distance. There wouldn't be another attack for a while. She wondered what had prompted this one.

Desperation, Jaxi suggested. *Misery. They have nothing to lose.*

Do we?

I can't speak for you, but I live in hope that my situation will improve. At the very least, perhaps some new books will be dropped off in the prison library.

"This way." The guard ushered Sardelle into the cage, then shut and latched the door. He hadn't let go of her arm yet, as if she would run off and return to those awful tunnels. She suffered the grip, though couldn't help but dwell on the fact that yesterday—no, three hundred years ago—few men or women would have presumed to touch her without invitation, even some of the military commanders she had worked with for years. It wasn't so much that she was aloof or in the habit of reprimanding people who did so, but the ungifted had always regarded the gifted with respect—or, in some cases, perhaps more than she had realized, fear and wariness.

The second soldier walked over to the machine and pulled a lever. Clanks sounded, and the cage started moving, being pulled up the rails into darkness. Sardelle twisted her head to squint up the track. A distant light waited, little more than a pinprick. As the cage rose, she could feel herself being pulled farther and farther from Jaxi. Their link was strong enough that they could communicate across a lot of miles —since being joined with the soulblade, she had never been far enough away to truly test their range—but the symbolism made the

problem feel more dramatic than it was. Nothing was truly changing, and yet… she felt like she was abandoning her only friend left in the world.

Don't worry, came the dry response. *You wouldn't be going far.*

Right, Jaxi had said this was a prison. Walking out the front door or gate or whatever they had up there wouldn't be an option. She trusted that she could evade whatever security they had and escape though.

Not unless you've learned to fly. The Ice Blades are as high as they ever were, and the road over the pass was destroyed when these people's ancestors took down half the mountain. Also… the first snows of winter have come.

Oh. But the guard had mentioned new prisoners arriving. *How do these people get in and out?*

Weather permitting, they fly.

They fly*?* Sardelle was glad for the darkness, so the soldier wouldn't see the way her mouth had dropped open.

They have ships that sail the airways, held up by giant balloons, and they also have small, maneuverable mechanical craft designed after the dragons of eld. As I've been telling you, the world has changed.

"How'd you get down here, anyway?" the soldier asked, disturbing the images she had been trying to form.

Sardelle shrugged. "Just came down."

"Huh."

She caught a hint of irritation in that single syllable. A point of pride? Since she had implied she had somehow gotten past him, or perhaps one of his fellow guards? They *did* seem a competent bunch; she could see where a suggestion of laxness would rankle. So long as he didn't start thinking of magical reasons she might have slipped past.

The tram seemed to be making decent speed, with a hint of cold fresh air whispering into the cage, but they had only made it halfway up. Sardelle wondered how deep into the mountain their tunnels reached. Maybe there was some way she could convince them to angle toward Jaxi's resting place. With pickaxes and shovels, it would probably take ages, but… she had to try.

"You mentioned taking me to a women's area," Sardelle said, "but I actually need to see the person in charge." She hoped that wasn't the vodka-swilling general he had mentioned. "Can you take me to him or her?"

The soldier snorted. "The general doesn't see prisoners."

"Ever?"

"Ever."

Chapter 2

Sardelle stepped out of the cage and stopped so quickly the soldier nearly tripped over her. Icy wind buffeted her, whipping at her dress and raising gooseflesh on her arms. She gaped at the black stone fortress around her, around the tiny valley where merchants had once sold cheese and crops in the summer and where a wide road and bridge had led over the river and to the back gate leading into Galmok Mountain. The Goat Peak River was still there, half iced over as it meandered through the large courtyard within the fortress walls, but there was nothing inviting about it or the valley anymore. The crenellations and cannon-like weapons on the walls were as forbidding as the Ice Blades themselves, the snow covered peaks rising in all four directions around the valley, scraping the sky as they towered another five thousand feet above the already lofty valley. Most of the peaks hadn't changed, but Galmok… She stared in horror. It looked like a volcano rather than the majestic mountain it had once been, its upper walls slumped inward with a misshapen bowl where the peak had once been.

The soldier shoved her. "Get going, girl."

Sardelle wrenched her gaze from the view and stumbled down a path that hadn't been there the last time she had been outside. Just yesterday, her mind wanted to add, though she had accepted by now that it had *not* been yesterday. Aside from the three centuries that had passed, it had been summer when she had entered Galmok and warm enough for her dress. Now… she wrapped her arms around herself as she picked her route, the trail following the tramline down toward the center of the fortress. There were other holes in the mountain, other tram tracks plunging into the darkness. What were they mining for? Crystal? Hadn't one of her attackers said that? She couldn't imagine what sort of crystal they had found in there, though she did recall gold and silver veins in the area. A smelter set up on the far side of the fortress seemed to suggest the likelihood of precious metal mining.

Another push nearly made her stumble. "You act like you haven't seen this all before. I've got a report to put together. Walk faster." He pointed at a large stone building with laundry hanging on a line,

whipping in the breeze as it dried in the meager sun.

"That's where we're going?" Even as Sardelle asked, a pair of women strode out of another building and headed for the one with the laundry lines. They wore heavy wool dresses and socks, scarves, hats, and fur jackets as they carried baskets of linens.

"Yes," the soldier said, drawing out the syllable as if he were talking to an imbecile.

Sardelle sighed and headed in the indicated direction. At least there were women here. She ought to be able to get information from them, one way or another. Maybe, given time, she could figure out a way to arrange a meeting with that general.

She walked over a bridge, but paused at the top, realizing her unfriendly guide had fallen behind. He had stopped to stare into the western sky. A strange flying craft was banking around Bandit Mountain and angling toward the fortress. Flying. She hadn't quite believed it when Jaxi had mentioned it, but the bronze metallic craft clearly wasn't a bird. With wings outstretched and something on the tips that resembled talons, it did vaguely resemble a dragon, at least the ones Sardelle had seen illustrated in books, the creatures having been extinct for a thousand years or more now. Some sort of rotating fan buzzed, keeping the contraption aloft.

A propeller, Jaxi said dryly.

Hush, just because you've been reading books these past centuries, doesn't mean I have. What's powering it?

The soldier muttering to himself distracted Sardelle, and she didn't hear the answer.

"What's this about?" the man asked. "Supplies and prisoners came in yesterday… shouldn't be anything due for two weeks."

Whatever it is, it could be an escape chance for you.

I'm not leaving without you, Jaxi.

I'm not going to suffocate or die here. You can come back when you can.

The fortress didn't look like it would be any easier to sneak into than it would be to sneak out of. Besides… where would she go? This was—had been—home.

There is that. A mental sigh accompanied Jaxi's comment.

The flying contraption banked again. It was circling the valley like an osprey searching for a fish to snatch out of a lake. None of the soldiers on the ramparts were racing for the cannons, so Sardelle assumed it was a friendly aircraft, though everyone was watching it draw closer with curiosity. It angled for the wide, flat roof of the biggest building in the fortress, a two-story structure backing up to one of the walls. A flat roof was a strange choice for mountains that received many feet of snow every year—the other buildings had

steeply pitched tops, as one would expect—but as the craft lowered, she realized that particular spot must have been designed for landing, though she couldn't imagine how it might be done. An osprey might be able to fold its wings in and alight on a perch, but a manmade craft wouldn't have that ability, surely. It seemed to be designed for going straight ahead, needing those wide banking turns to switch direction. But some sort of thrusters rotated down from the wings, allowing the bronze contraption to slow down without falling out of the sky. Soon it was hovering over the building, and then it lowered, the bottom half disappearing from her sight.

And I thought the rifles were impressive.

Jaxi didn't respond. Maybe she was investigating the craft.

A few soldiers jogged out of the second story of that big building and headed up the stairs to the roof. Their presence seemed to remind her guard of his duty, for he joined her on the bridge, pointing to the laundry building again.

"Let's go. We'll find out soon enough who's visiting."

Though curious about the flying machine, Sardelle couldn't imagine that a visitor would change anything for her, so she walked off without arguing. Maybe the pilot would stay overnight and she might have a chance to examine the craft. It wasn't her priority though.

A woman walked out of the laundry building as Sardelle and the soldier were walking up. The scent of soap and starch drifted through the doorway. The woman's figure was almost stout and brawny enough to be a man. She had a basket balanced on a broad hip and started to walk off the path around the pair, but the soldier stopped her with a hand.

"One-forty-three, isn't it?" he asked.

Sardelle blinked. What?

The number meant something to the woman, for she nodded. "Yeah."

"Looks like you lost someone." The soldier pushed Sardelle toward the woman.

"Never seen her before."

"I think she came in yesterday."

"Then why wasn't she here an hour before dawn to report for work, like everyone else?"

"No idea," the soldier said. "Found her down on the bottom level of the mine."

The woman gave an exasperated huff and looked Sardelle up and down like she might be a lost toddler. A particularly dumb lost toddler. "Seven gods, girl, you trying to get yourself killed? Or worse?"

What was worse than being killed? Sardelle thought of Tace and his

crony and answered her own question.

"What is this?" The woman plucked at Sardelle's sleeve. "Where are your work clothes? You've got to be freezing. What's your number?"

Feeling lost and bewildered, Sardelle broke her oath as a sorceress and skimmed the surface of the woman's thoughts. Numbers. People were called by numbers rather than names. She didn't have to dig deep to find a memory of this woman—Dhasi before she had become One-forty-three—stepping off a supply ship with two other women and two-dozen men and being assigned her number.

"They told me, but I forgot," Sardelle said. She could have made one up, but what happened if someone already had it? She hugged herself, thinking of sticking her hands under her armpits. What were the odds this conversation could be moved indoors? Her toes were freezing, and the rest of her wasn't much warmer.

"You forgot." One-forty-three—Sardelle hated to think of her as a number, but didn't want to get in trouble for one day calling her by a name that had never been shared—threw up her hands, dropped the basket, and turned for the door. "Wait here. I'll get the roster and try to figure out where she's supposed to be." She stomped back inside. Heat as well as soap odors drifted out, and Sardelle wouldn't have minded following her.

She glanced at the soldier, wondering if he had been irked by the woman, who was presumably a prisoner, the same as the miners below, giving him an order. The soldier was busy though, eyeing… Sardelle's chest. She grimaced. Unfortunately, the sunlight showed off the sleek if dusty dress and the curves beneath it all too well, far more effectively than the lanterns in the mines. She had never thought herself a great beauty, but if the beefy laundry lady was representative of the women here, and if the men had as little contact with the outside world as she suspected, she supposed she could see the interest. See it, but not condone it. She watched the soldier through slitted eyes, wondering if another rash breakout would be in order.

Be careful, Jaxi warned. *These people might be brutes, but they're not dumb. And it doesn't take much for them to start talking of witches.*

That girl you mentioned who was thrown in the lake… was she gifted?

If she had been, do you think she would have let herself drown? My understanding from their books is that there are occasionally people born with talent, but that they either get hunted down or learn quickly to hide their… quirks. They don't receive any training, not like they did in our day, so they rarely develop much more than a sixth sense.

The soldier touched Sardelle's sleeve, lifting his eyes to meet hers. "You with someone yet, woman?"

"*With* someone?" They all agreed she had just been pushed off the supply ship the day before. She didn't have a name-number—or a clue

—so how could she be *with* someone already?

"I'm in room seventy-two in the barracks, second floor." He nodded toward a building across the square. "Think on it. You're going to have trouble around here if you're not someone's girl."

To punctuate this point, a woman carrying a basket on her hip walked toward the laundry building, a woman who was quite obviously pregnant, very pregnant. Sardelle stared. She couldn't imagine having a child in this environment. She hadn't even seen any children. Was it allowed? Or did they…? She gulped. They wouldn't kill the babies, would they? They couldn't be held accountable for the crimes of their parents.

"She wasn't with someone," the soldier said after the pregnant woman had passed them and gone inside. "Heard it was rough on her."

"You people didn't think to stop it?"

The soldier shrugged. "Lot more of you all than there are of us. We can't be everywhere." That shrug said he didn't care very much about the fact either. "Better to be with a soldier. The prisoners usually don't bother you much if you are."

Usually? Much?

"I'll think about it," Sardelle managed to say rather than punching him. Although, at least with a punch, she wouldn't have to worry about anyone accusing her of witchcraft.

"Good." He smiled and repeated, "Room seventy-two. Tell the night guard you're here to see me, Rolff, and they'll let you in."

"This sort of thing is common, is it?"

For soldiers in the Iskandian Guard, there had been a regulation against molesting prisoners, but she had no idea what was permitted here, or even whose army she was dealing with. Most of those she had seen so far had the pale skin and brown to black hair of the natives of the Iskandian continent, but that didn't mean governments hadn't come and gone over the centuries.

The soldier looked away, shrugged, then looked back. "Nobody cares here."

Ah, so there *was* a regulation. It just wasn't being enforced. Well, that knowledge didn't help her much.

"I'd be doing you a favor," he said. "Trust me."

Sure, he just wanted to help *her*. How considerate.

He stepped closer, laying his hand on her arm. "I'm not so bad, promise. You'll think about it? You said that, right?"

Might want to take him up on the offer.

Jaxi!

What? He's not so bad looking, and he was a good fighter. Bet he's all muscle under that uniform.

This is what I get for agreeing to link with a teenaged soul, one who never got past her horny period before channeling herself into our sword.
"Yes," she told the soldier, who was now stroking her arm. "I said that."

Where *was* that laundry lady anyway? She spotted a pair of uniformed men descending the stairs from the building and walking in their direction. Good, a distraction.

"There's your guest," Sardelle said, nodding toward the men, hoping Rolff would stop fondling her arm if an officer was walking past. Of course, she could only hope the newcomers were officers. With the soldiers wearing fur parkas in addition to their uniform jackets, she couldn't see insignia, not that she could have deciphered it anyway.

Her soldier stepped back from her at the men's approach though, dropping his arm, no, jerking it behind his back. "I can't believe it," he whispered. "Do you know who that is?"

Please, she didn't know who *anyone* was. "No."

He gaped at her, but only for a second before focusing on the two men again. "That's Colonel Ridgewalker Zirkander."

Ridgewalker? How cocky. Maybe he had given the name to himself.

"What's he doing here?" the soldier breathed, his voice scarcely more than a whisper as the two visitors drew nearer. The younger of the pair, one who kept trying to get the other to let him carry the duffle bag slung over his shoulder, was talking and pointing toward a building past the laundry facility, but the path would take them by Sardelle and Rolff—with six inches of snow in the courtyard, the cleared sidewalks were the only logical options. Good. She hoped one of them would ask what Rolff was doing away from his post, which might result in him leaving her alone. Didn't he have some dead miners to report, anyway?

As they walked, the colonel had his head bent toward the younger man, listening to whatever information he was being given. He commented on something and grinned. The young soldier or maybe officer—he had a more academic look about him than the sturdy Rolff—blinked in surprise, then rushed to nod and smile back, though he didn't seem to know if that was quite the right response. Smiles and humor probably weren't commonplace around here. The young officer looked to be in his twenties and had the earnest eager-to-please face of a dog hoping for a treat. The colonel was closer to Sardelle's age, probably older, though there wasn't any gray in what she could see of his short brown hair—a fur cap canted at a roguish angle that she doubted was regulation hid most of it. He was on the tall side with a lean athletic build the parka didn't quite hide. He had a handsome face, a scar on his chin notwithstanding, and dark brown eyes that

glinted with humor to match the grin that hadn't entirely faded.

Maybe you can get his *room number.*

Jaxi!

What? He's closer to your age than this puppy. Or are you holding out for the general? He doesn't sound promising.

Before Sardelle could give Jaxi a mental slap on the cheek, the colonel glanced in her direction. The glance became a second look, a startled one. For a moment, she thought he might recognize her somehow—her name and face were—had been—well known, at least among the soldiers she had assisted. For all she knew, she was in a book somewhere. But no, that didn't seem to be recognition on his face, just surprise.

He frowned at Rolff who came into an attention stance so alert and erect that he was quivering. He snapped his fist up for a salute.

"Corporal, why is this woman standing outside in so little clothing?" the colonel asked. "It's twenty degrees out."

"It's… she…"

Sardelle almost felt sorry for Rolff, no doubt groping for a way to explain her unexpected presence. Almost.

After a few more stutters, he settled on, "She's a prisoner, sir!"

The humor that had warmed the colonel's brown eyes earlier had evaporated. "How does *that* answer my question?" His frown shifted to the young officer at his side, who lifted his hands defensively.

"I've never seen her before, sir."

"We found her in the mines," Rolff said. "She wasn't even supposed to be there. The women work up here." Rolff flung a hand toward the laundry room—the door had opened, and the laundry lady stood there. She couldn't have heard more than the last couple of sentences, but she caught the gist and waved her clipboard.

"I got two new girls yesterday and no word about a third."

Sardelle thought about saying something, but she didn't have a cover story worked out that could explain the confusion around her appearance. She was starting to worry that between everyone's babbling, someone would figure out she hadn't come off that supply ship yesterday, but the colonel had a distasteful look on his face at what, coming in new, he must judge as incompetence. Sardelle raised a single eyebrow—the winter she had come home to teach, that expression had made her students stammer with the certainty that they had done something wrong.

The colonel didn't stammer, but he *did* look exasperated. He dropped his duffle bag, unbuttoned his parka, and handed it to her.

"Corporal, get this woman some appropriate clothing. Captain, I want her report on my desk within the hour." He grabbed his duffle bag and hefted it over his shoulder again. "I'll find my office on my

own."

"But, but, sir!" The captain took a step after him, then paused, turned toward Sardelle, and held out a beseeching hand. "I don't know her number, sir!"

"Not my problem," the colonel called back. He muttered something else that sounded like, "What's a damned number?" but Sardelle couldn't be sure of the words.

Grateful for the parka, she tugged it on. Her teeth were starting to chatter. It was still warm inside, with a clean, masculine scent permeating the lining. After standing out in the cold, it was all she could do not to start snuggling with the fur.

Corporal Rolff scratched his head. "Colonel Zirkander has a desk here?"

"He does now," the captain said.

"*Why?*"

"He's relieving General Bockenhaimer as fort commander."

Rolff mouthed another why but didn't voice it. Whatever Zirkander was known for, it apparently wasn't commanding forts. At first, Sardelle found this new situation promising—unlike everyone else she had met here, the man seemed to have a conscience—but when the captain jogged off to look for a report that didn't exist, reality batted her relief away. This new colonel already sounded like he was going to be more efficient than the old general. Before, she might have wriggled through a crack, but now? How was she going to explain her presence? And if she couldn't, what then? Would they assume her some kind of spy? Even in her day, spies had been shot. She had better start talking to people and come up with a plausible story, because she had a feeling she would be called into that office before the day was out.

. . . . .

A dusty directory that hadn't been updated since the *last* general was commander led Ridge to an administration building, where he headed to the second floor, searching for Bockenhaimer's office. The roar of engines started up on the other side of the fort. The pilot must expect it wouldn't take the general long to pack and catch his ride out of this place. Ridge paused at a window to gaze out, the lump that had been in his throat the whole ride out returning as he watched the man go through his safety check.

"It's just a year," he told himself. "A year in the deepest level of hell," he added, his eyes drawn to the forbidding mountains fencing in the fortress on all sides.

He had only spoken to five people thus far, and he could already tell the place was a mess. Did he have it in him to fix that mess? Just

because he had returned from enough successful missions to get promoted regularly didn't mean he had the experience for this kind of job. He had already made an idiot of himself, gawking at that woman in the courtyard. He supposed women could be murderers the same as men, but he hadn't expected to find any here, and certainly not one he would have ambled up to in a bar and bought a drink. Admittedly, she didn't seem the bar type. Too calm. Too serene. Those pale blue eyes… they had been attractive, yes, especially in contrast to that raven hair, but they had seemed far too elegant for the dives he frequented. Not that that would have kept him from buying her that drink if she *had* shown up in one.

"Yeah, Ridge. Drool over the prisoners here. That'll look good on your report." He shook his head and resumed his climb.

A lieutenant carrying a stack of papers was coming out of a doorway, and judging by the quizzical expression on his face, he had heard Ridge talking to himself. Wonderful.

"The general's office?" he asked.

"End of the hall, sir." The lieutenant pointed, then glanced at a clock on the wall. "Though… I don't know if he'll be, uhm."

"In?"

"Oh, he's in." The lieutenant looked like he wanted to say more, but shut his mouth and repeated, "End of the hall, sir."

"Thanks."

Ridge dropped his duffle bag by the door, knocked, and smoothed his uniform. He told himself he didn't particularly care what some retiring general thought of him, but foresaw being reprimanded for the missing parka. At this time of year, it had to be part of the official uniform up here. The cold seemed to bite right through the wooden walls of the building and creep up from the floor. For the second time, he wondered what judge had convicted that woman and sent her up here in a summer dress.

A long moment had passed, so he knocked again. He shrugged and opened the door. The snores met his ears at the same time as the scent of alcohol and stale vomit met his nose. Well, that explained some things.

The white-haired man leaning back in his chair, his head on the rest, his boots up on his desk, didn't look like he would have been awake—or sober—even if Ridge had arrived at dawn. A tipped over metal flask rested beside the boots, and several glass vodka bottles occupied the waste bin. A couple of suspicious stains in the corner implied the floor had been vomited on a few times—and poorly cleaned after the fact. In fact, a clean circle next to a potted tree made him think someone had simply pushed the stand over to cover up one such recent mess.

Ridge cleared his throat. “General?”

Only snores answered him.

Ridge walked around the desk, said, “General?” again, and gently shook the man’s shoulder.

Bockenhaimer lurched upright, eyes leaping open as he tore a pistol from his belt. Ridge caught his wrist before he could aim it anywhere vital.

“General Bockenhaimer? I’m your replacement.”

The general was scowling down at Ridge’s grip, looking like he was still contemplating shooting this intruder, if he could only figure out how, but his bloodshot eyes lurched toward Ridge when the words sank in. “Replacement?” he whispered.

“Colonel Zirkander, sir.” Ridge pulled out his orders and the general’s discharge papers, unfolded them with one hand—that pistol was loaded and cocked, so he wasn’t quite ready to release his grip on the general’s wrist—and laid them on the desk. “Your retirement went through a couple of months early. I’m your replacement.”

“Zirkander, the pilot?” The general’s grip finally relaxed. He moved to return the pistol to his holster, and Ridge let him.

“Yes, sir.” He waited for Bockenhaimer to point out that neither pilots nor colonels had the experience necessary to command army installations, but the general merely leaned forward to squint at the papers. “Retirement?” He leaned closer, a delighted smile stretching his lips. “Retirement!”

Ridge resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He wondered if the general had been a drunk before they shipped him out here—could this place have been a punishment for him as well?—or if commanding a remote prison full of felons had driven him to drink.

“Yes, sir,” Ridge said. “If you could tell me about the S.O.P. here and give me a few—”

Bockenhaimer jumped to his feet, wobbled—Ridge caught him and held him upright despite being surprised—and lunged for the window. “Is that my flier? I can leave today?”

“Yes, sir. But I’d appreciate it if you—”

The general threw open the window and waved to the pilot. “Wait for me, son. I’m already packed!”

Oddly, the wobbling didn’t slow Bockenhaimer down much when he ran around the desk and out the door. Ridge’s mouth was still hanging open when the general appeared in the courtyard below, a bag tucked under his arm as he raced along the cleared sidewalks.

“That’s… not exactly how the change-of-command ceremonies I’ve seen usually go.” Ridge hadn’t been expecting a parade and a marching band, not in this remote hole, but a briefing would have been nice.

He removed his fur cap and pushed a hand through his hair, surveying his new office. He wondered how long it would take to get rid of the alcohol odor. He also wondered how long that poor potted plant in the corner had been dead. Hadn't that young captain been the general's aide? He couldn't have had some private come in to make sure the place was cleaned? Maybe the staff was too busy guarding the prisoners, and the officers had to wield their own brooms here.

Ridge was looking for the fort's operations manuals when a knock came at the door.

"Sir?" Captain Heriton, the officer who had met him at the flier, leaned in, an apprehensive look on his face. His pale hair and pimples made him look about fifteen instead of the twenty-five or more he must be.

"Yes?"

"It's about that woman… she said she was dropped off yesterday—we got a big load of new convicts—and that she doesn't remember the number she was issued."

"The number?"

"Yes, sir. The prisoners are issued numbers instead of being called by name. Keeps down the in-fighting. Some of them are prisoners of war and pirates, and there are a few former soldiers, and some of those clansmen from up in the north hills. It's easier if they start out with new identities here. The general didn't brief you?" The captain glanced toward the window—the flier had already taken off. "I guess he did leave abruptly."

"Abruptly, yes, that's a word." Not the word Ridge would have used, but he couldn't bring himself to badmouth the general yet, not until he had spent a couple of weeks here and gotten a true feel for where he had landed. "You don't happen to know where the operations manuals are, do you?"

"They should be in here somewhere, sir." The captain started to lean back into the hall.

"The woman's report, Captain," Ridge said dryly. He knew the man hadn't found it, but wasn't ready to let some prisoner wander around without being sorted or collated or whatever it was that was supposed to happen here.

"Er, yes, sir. I'm not sure where to look."

"How about under her name? I imagine she could supply you with that."

"She did, sir. And I tried looking, but her folder wasn't with the batch of files that came in yesterday."

"Perhaps already placed alphabetically?" Ridge suggested. This kid never would have made it onto his squad. Even when he wasn't speaking, his eyes darted around nervously. Waffly. Was that a word?

He wasn't sure. Maybe he would have the kid look it up after he found the missing report.

"Uhm, the archive rooms are not exactly alphabetically categorized. They're more… well, the system was already in place when I arrived."

Ridge stood up. "Show me."

The captain's eyebrows rose. Ridge had a feeling the general had never asked to see the archives. He also had a feeling prisoners with missing files weren't all that common.

"Yes, sir. This way."

Ridge followed the slender officer down two flights of stairs to an icy basement that had him wishing someone would have brought his parka back. Cobwebs draped old wooden filing cabinets along with newer metal ones. Dust-caked folders sat atop a lot of the cabinets, either left for later storage or taken out and not returned. A few tables in the middle held boxes with more files. If Ridge hadn't known better, based on the dust collection and the number of cabinets, he would have guessed the prison camp to be hundreds of years old. If all of those storage units were full of records, this place had to be going through people at an alarming rate. There weren't *that* many barracks buildings up there, and while rummaging for the manuals, Ridge had uncovered the most recent supply receipts. Food and gear was being brought in for seven hundred and ten prisoners and one hundred soldiers. There had to be thousands of files smothered in the dust before him.

"Captain."

"Yes, sir?" The wariness in the young man's voice wasn't heartening, but Ridge pressed on anyway.

"My job is to get this fort running smoothly this winter and increase output." Actually his orders said very little about his "job," but as a pilot, he knew how crucial the crystals buried in this mountain were. He wouldn't sit on his butt here for the next year and drink himself into a stupor while lackadaisical work went on—or didn't—in the tunnels below. "Can you guess what your job is going to be this winter?"

"Sir?" More wariness.

Ridge smiled and thumped the man on the back to try and take some of the sting out of his next words. "Organizing this room. Alphabetically. With the people who are still here in those cabinets and the deceased or departed there." Did any of them ever "depart," he wondered? From what he had heard, this was an assignment of life without possibility of parole.

The captain's narrow shoulders slumped. "Yes, sir."

"You can recruit helpers."

Those shoulders slumped further. “No, I can’t, sir. All the men are needed to guard the prisoners. That’s why this building is so lightly staffed. Most of those offices upstairs are empty. There are only a few of us running operations, and that’s why there’s never time for… projects.” He glanced at Ridge, then straightened. “But I’ll find time, sir.”

“Good. I’ll be looking into the mines and figuring out if something can be done to ease the burden there as well. Am I right in that most of the problem is the miners trying to kill our people and escape?”

“Yes, sir. Mostly in the spring and summer, since there’s no place to go in the winter, but some of them just lose their brains and go crazy and attack.”

“I’ll see what can be done,” Ridge repeated.

The captain gave him a curious, almost hopeful look, and saluted.

Maybe Ridge shouldn’t have promised anything. Who did he think he was that he could change such a system for the better? Well, surely he couldn’t do any *worse* than Bockenhaimer had done.

“Yes, sir,” the captain said. “I’ll get started on this today.”

“Send that woman to my office first. I’ll fill out a temporary report for her until you find the one that came in.”

“Oh, I can do that, sir. There’s no need for you to waste your time on a prisoner.”

“*You* are going to be busy in *here*.” Ridge smiled and spread a hand toward the basement.

“Er, yes, sir.” To his credit, the captain’s shoulders didn’t slump this time.

Ridge headed up the stairs, glad the captain hadn’t protested further, telling him that interviewing prisoners was too menial a task for the fort commander. It *was*, he admitted, the sort of thing some young lieutenant could and should do. So why was *he* volunteering for it?

“Just want to make sure I get my parka back,” he muttered.

Chapter 3

Sardelle walked up the stairs in the administration building, Corporal Rolff clomping behind her, his boots ringing on the wooden floors. She felt less uncomfortable walking in front of him now that she was wearing a heavy ankle-length wool dress, boots, cap, and scruffier version of the colonel's parka—it seemed to be the official women's uniform here. Even without the shield of less revealing clothing, Rolff hadn't made any more mentions of his room number, not since the colonel's appearance.

"That's the general's, er, colonel's door." Rolff pointed past her to the end of the hall.

Sardelle had already rehearsed her story, so all she could do was keep walking and take a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. Strange that reporting to some military commander could make her nervous after so many years of being outside of and, in a way, above such organizations.

Not here.

I know, Jaxi. I understand the situation thoroughly.

I'm just reminding you so you remember to act properly contrite and subdued in your meeting. Also, don't give him a rash.

Sardelle kept her snort inward, not wanting Rolff to think her odd—or wonder if she was having conversations with herself in her head. That was probably considered an indicator of witchy ways here.

The Itchy Brothers are seeing the medic right now in another building, Jaxi informed her. *I hope your name doesn't come up.*

It shouldn't since they don't know my name.

You've made enough of an impression that Woman in the Green Dress is all they'll have to say.

It'll be fine. Someone will diagnose it as a sexually transmitted disease. I'm surprised they even went to the medic. You'd think that would be embarrassing for them.

Sardelle supposed it would be immature of her to wish she were standing outside the door of that medic's office, so she could listen to the two explaining how they had both come to have the same rash on their genitals.

Oh, I'm already listening in. Want the details?

That's all right. I better focus on this meeting. Sardelle stopped before the door, actually a couple of paces before the door. A waste bin and crate full of empty alcohol bottles made it difficult to draw closer. She shifted the colonel's parka, draping it over her left arm, so she could knock with her right, but she paused when a long scrape, followed by a thud and a thump came from inside.

A cream.

Sardelle blinked at Jaxi's comment, at first believing it had something to do with the noises in the office. *What?*

They're being prescribed a cream. And a suggestion that they stay out of each other's pants.

Sardelle laughed before she could catch herself, though she turned it into a cough.

"He won't want to wait all day," Rolff said.

"I just wasn't sure about those noises." Two more heavy thumps sounded, and Sardelle pointed at the door. "Are you sure he's not… doing battle with someone in there?" Or beating the tar out of some wayward private?

"Nobody here would pick a fight with him." Rolff leaned past her and knocked three times.

The noises inside stopped, and a "Yeah?" floated out the door.

Sardelle didn't know whether to take that as an invitation or not, but she *had* been instructed to report promptly. She turned the knob, stepped past the bottles, and poked her head around the door.

Colonel Zirkander was balanced in the air, one boot on the desk and one boot halfway up floor-to-ceiling bookcases built into a sidewall. He held a feather duster in one hand while he prodded at fat tomes that looked like they had been resting undisturbed on that top shelf for decades. He had shed some of his winter clothing, and the sleeves of his gray shirt were rolled up, revealing the ropy muscles of his forearms and… a lot of fresh dirt smudges. Dust—and was that a cobweb?—smeared his short brown hair, as if he had been sticking his head under beds that hadn't seen a maid in years. Or maybe a big faded brown couch, Sardelle amended, considering the office's furnishings. Whatever state they had been in before, they weren't dusty now. The floor gleamed, courtesy of a damp mop, bucket, and broom and dustpan leaning against the wall next to the door. A stack of folded rags and a jug of floor polish suggested the next task on the list.

"Uhm, sir?" Rolff asked, though he seemed stunned at finding his commanding officer cleaning, and the words came out quietly.

"Hah." The colonel, who hadn't stopped dusting and organizing books at their arrival, pulled a thick tome off the shelf. "Found you."

Rolff stepped inside, came to attention, and saluted. “Sir, I’ve brought the prisoner as requested, sir.”

The colonel waved at him with the feather duster instead of returning the salute, which would have been hard given the fullness of his hands. “Good, thanks.”

Sardelle bit back a smile at the corporal’s puzzled face. He clearly didn’t know how to react to a commanding officer that didn’t seem to care about military decorum and pomp.

“Shall I… stand guard outside, sir?” Rolff asked.

“Do you have a job you’re supposed to be doing right now?” The colonel hopped down, grabbed a dust cloth, and wiped off the book.

“I was on guard shift in Level Thirteen when this all started, sir.”

“Better get back to that then. I’ll hope my roguish smile and charismatic ways are enough to keep—” he glanced at a folder on the desk, “—Sardelle from pummeling me into submission.”

Colonel Zirkander smiled—roguishly—at both of them, but Sardelle imagined herself the lone recipient and found herself gazing back, admiring his lively face, dust smudges and all. His dark brown eyes had been so serious in the courtyard, but she sensed that this warm twinkle was more typical of him.

“Er, yes, sir,” Rolff said, clearly more flustered than beguiled by the colonel’s roguish smile.

Sardelle tore her gaze away from Zirkander’s face, lest he notice her long stare. She eyed the folder instead. It had her name—first name real and last name made up—on the front above several blank lines. The information to be filled in during this interview? Was he going to trust her to tell him the truth? And had the missing folder simply been dismissed as some clerk’s error? She hoped so.

The door shut, though the clank of glass floated through along with an *oof*.

The colonel shrugged, his expression a little sheepish. “I was going to toss those bottles out the window, but couldn’t be sure anyone would clean up the mess before someone cut their foot. Not on this installation anyway.”

With the corporal gone, Sardelle could only assume the words were for her, though he was blowing dust off the cover of the book instead of looking at her.

“Is that why you’re cleaning your own office?” she asked, figuring she should chat with him if he was interested in it. Anything she could do to establish a rapport. “All the officers I’ve ever met had minions to handle such things.”

“Apparently all the minions here are busy guarding prisoners. I realized the only way I was going to find what I was looking for was going to be to clean up around here. Also… the green-fuzz-covered

vomit stains on the floor were disturbing me. I'm sure it was my imagination, but I thought I could see them moving out of the corner of my eye every time I looked away." Seemingly satisfied with his handiwork, he laid the book on the desk next to her folder. *Magroth Crystal Mines: Regulations and Standard Operation Procedures*.

You read that one, Jaxi?

Oddly, the title didn't entice me to delve in.

"Have you met many officers?" The colonel cocked his head, giving her a curious look.

Er, right. Her cover story didn't mention any time spent with the military and certainly not how she had, as *sherastu*—mage advisor—sat at tables with clan leaders and generals. She was going to have to be careful with what she said. "I've been… questioned by a few." Speaking of roguish smiles… she tried to give him one.

He stared at her. So much for roguish. She had been told more often that her smiles were enigmatic or distracted rather than playful or mischievous.

Don't try to change your personality, or you're sure to get caught in the lies. Pirates come with all manner of… mannerisms.

Sardelle acknowledged this advice with a mental wave.

"Right." Colonel Zirkander recovered and tapped the folder. "I just need you for a few minutes, if you don't mind. I want to get a temporary file made for you until my captain finds your real one."

Sardelle had been thinking that he was oddly polite for a commander talking to a prisoner, but her mind lurched at his last words. "Did he already look?"

"Yes, but… let's just say I've seen the archives room, and I'm not surprised files are missing. I've tasked him with cleaning and organizing it though, so we'll find your record. We'll find everyone's record and make sure all the names—numbers—match up with faces. The way things are now, I don't know how they even order supplies with any accuracy here."

Sardelle caught herself breathing more rapidly and forced the airflow to slow down. It was too early to panic. Even if they never found her record, that wouldn't necessarily condemn her. It could have been left behind a seat on the airship that had supposedly brought her in, right? Surely these things happened.

Why don't you just make a fake record?

Jaxi's thought surprised her, but then she wondered why she hadn't thought of it herself already.

Because you're an honest and forthright person who doesn't think in deceitful scheming ways. Better get over that.

Thanks for the tip.

Creating a false record wouldn't be a stretch of her powers, so long

as she knew where the blank records were stored and where to float it off to when she was done. Maybe…

Sardelle realized the colonel was watching her. Waiting for a response? He hadn't asked a question, had he? She reviewed what he had said. "I haven't been here long, but it does seem a touch… chaotic. And in regard to the supplies, I did notice that some of the miners are well-fed and others look malnourished and scrawny." Like those disillusioned sods who had attacked the guards.

Zirkander's eyes sharpened. "Do they?" He took out a pen and a tiny spiral notebook and scribbled something on a page already filled with a list. "It's probably survival of the strongest and meanest down there, right now. All right. Have a seat, will you?" He tossed the notebook aside and, mid-gesture, noticed there wasn't a chair in front of the desk. In fact, aside from the couch and the colonel's chair, there weren't any other seats in the room. "Er, guess the general didn't invite people in for meetings often."

He considered the couch for a moment—there was room for three or four to sit on it—but shook his head, then gestured her to his chair. "Ms. Sordenta."

It took Sardelle a second to remember that was the last name she had given. She stepped around the desk and sat in the wooden chair, the armrests and back spindles more comfortable than she would have guessed from looking at it. Zirkander grabbed the folder and a pen, then perched on the armrest of the couch. Ah, too intimate a piece of furniture to share with a prisoner? Logically, Sardelle agreed with the… professionalism of the choice, though the part of her that didn't want to play prisoner to his fort commander would have preferred to sit with him on it.

Looks like you're not going to get his room number after all.

Hush, Jaxi.

Zirkander scribbled something on the corner of the paper stapled to the front of the file. "All right, full name is Sardelle Sordenta, yes? We have the spelling right?" He held up the paper so she could see.

Strange that something so minor as a fictitious last name bothered her, but it did. Still, she nodded and said, "Yes." She would have to lie about a lot more than her name to survive here.

"Date of birth?" he asked.

She froze. It was such an obvious question, but, in making up her elaborate pirate past, she hadn't thought of it. *Quick, Jaxi, what year is it now?*

"Balsoth fourteenth… " *873*, came Jaxi's answer. "839," she finished, hastily doing the math.

Hastily or not, Zirkander noticed the pause. He gazed at her for a long moment, before copying down her answer. Sardelle had been

keeping her senses ratcheted down since dealing with those thugs in the mine, but she eased up a touch now, needing to know if he thought she was lying. And right away she sensed that he did… and that he was disappointed. For some reason, that stung. What had he expected? Honesty from someone who, by default, had to be a criminal?

"Birthplace?" he prompted.

"Cairn Springs." That at least was true. She had been born at the base of these very mountains, about a hundred miles to the south.

"The Cairn Springs that was buried beneath a lava flow forty years ago?"

Er. "Yes. Near there, obviously not at the site of the old village. I was born in a rural area." *Jaxi! You didn't mention that my birthplace was gone?*

I didn't know. That's too far away for me to sense.

Something that big wasn't covered in a book?

Most of the books here are at least fifty years old. I don't think reading is a big pastime among the prisoners. Or the soldiers.

"We were shepherds," Sardelle went on—the colonel was writing down her lies, so she might as well go on with her story, "—a very boring lifestyle for a young person. That's why I left—to find a little excitement. That and the arranged marriage. I wasn't ready to settle down. I went off to the coast and got a job on a merchant ship." She actually could answer questions about sea life, if he asked. She had traveled with the fleet often to defend the country from enemy warships. "After a year, we were caught by pirates. I was given the option of walking the plank or joining the crew. I'm not very brave. I joined. They treated me… decently, I suppose. The first year was tough, but eventually I became one of them."

Zirkander had stopped writing. He had one boot up on the couch, his elbow on his knee, and his chin resting on his fist. Waiting for her to finish this fabricated story and see if she gave away anything useful in the telling? Yes. She didn't need her empathetic senses to tell that.

"Are you done?" he asked.

"I have another five years I can go over. But, ah, you don't seem to be recording the details."

"No. I was busy debating whether I should ask you to tie a clove hitch or if that would simply be embarrassing."

Sardelle *could* tie a clove hitch. Bastard.

I sense something.

My idiocy?

No. Outside. In the sky.

Sardelle looked toward the window, the sky visible beyond the freshly cleaned panes. From their vantage point, all she could see were

clouds rolling in off Goat Peak. But a shout arose in the courtyard. No, not the courtyard—it was coming from one of the watchtowers on the ramparts.

Zirkander jumped to his feet, tossing the folder on the desk, and strode to the window. Footsteps thundered in the hallway.

"Gen— Colonel Zirkander!" someone shouted two seconds before the door burst open. Two privates Sardelle hadn't seen before charged into the room. "Sir, there's an airship in the northern sky. It's not one of ours!"

"All right. Report to Sergeant Homish and get whatever security measures are around for the fortress in place. I'll come up to take a look."

Sardelle had been reaching out with her senses, trying to get a feel for the airship, so she wasn't shielding herself from the emotions in the room, the excitement and anticipation from the privates and the disgust from Zirkander, who felt he should have been reading the operations manual rather than dithering around with a prisoner. And then he was gone, jogging through the doorway and down the hall, and his emotions faded from her consciousness. Once again, she felt chagrinned that she had… disappointed him. Why she cared, she didn't know, but she had the urge to show him that she wasn't some useless prisoner, that spending time with her hadn't been a waste.

How are you going to do that? Jaxi's question held wariness.

Maybe everyone on the enemy ship will develop rashes, causing them to crash it into the side of the mountain.

I don't think your range is that good, Jaxi thought dryly.

We'll see.

Since the colonel hadn't left a guard or ordered her to remain in the office, Sardelle jogged down the hallway after him. In the courtyard, people were standing and gazing toward the sky, toward an airship that was little more than a speck lurking in the clouds near Goat Peak. Whoever had spotted it must have had a spyglass to identify whatever markings it had, to be certain it didn't belong to this army.

Up on the ramparts, soldiers were jogging into towers and to cannons. Cannons! They weren't thinking of firing those, were they? The calendar might not say winter yet, but piles of snow blanketed the steep mountain walls in all directions.

Sardelle spotted Zirkander and ran across the courtyard to the steps leading up to the wall. At first, no one stopped her—or even noticed her, their eyes toward the distant airship—but a soldier on the walkway grabbed her arm before she could race past him. The halt to her momentum spun her around, startling her, and she almost launched a mental attack. She caught herself a split second before she

would have hurled him away from her.

"Where do you think you're going, woman?" the soldier demanded.

"I'm in the middle of a meeting with the colonel." Sardelle tugged at her arm, but the man had a grip like a vise.

"A meeting. Sure you are."

She glanced over her shoulder. Zirkander was standing on the northern wall next to a cannon, pointing and talking to a young soldier who stood on the other side. There wasn't time to convince this buffoon to let her go. With a subtle tug from her mind, she unfastened his belt. The weight of the dagger and other pouches on it pulled it down with impressive speed, along with his trousers. It was enough to startle him into loosening his grip. Sardelle wrenched her arm free and sprinted toward the colonel.

"Stop that woman," the soldier called after her, amidst an impressive stream of curses.

At the corner, someone turned and grabbed for her. On the narrow walkway, she couldn't dodge far enough to the side, and he would have caught her, except she loosened the mortar in the stone beneath his feet. It wobbled, drawing his eye for a split second. She ducked his grasp and ran around the corner, coming to an abrupt halt before the colonel.

"The cannons," she panted, out of breath from the sprint. "You can't fire them, not this time of year." She pointed at a cornice on the nearest mountain. "Could start an avalanche."

Zirkander looked at her for several breaths before responding—why did she get the feeling he was trying to scrutinize her?

Probably wondering if you're a spy.

After my horrible lying? A real spy would be much smoother.

"In my experience," the colonel said, "an explosion has to be set off on or in close proximity to the snowpack to cause an avalanche, but if we need to fire, we will be careful." Something squeaked behind him on the walkway, and he pointed over his shoulder without looking. A pair of soldiers was wheeling out something that reminded Sardelle of the harpoon launchers on whaling ships.

As the soldier she had unbuckled charged up behind her—his trousers securely fastened again—she felt… sheepish. Of course a professional soldier would have experience blowing things up—explosives seemed to be far more common in this century than in hers.

A big hand clamped onto her shoulder. "I'm sorry, sir. I had… an equipment malfunction and didn't catch her before she wiggled by."

The soldier started to drag Sardelle backward, but Zirkander lifted a hand. "It's fine, Sergeant. She can stay. She was informing me about the conditions in the mines."

The soldier's face scrunched up. "Like… a spy?"

“Something like that.”

Sardelle read the double meaning in the colonel’s slitted eyes. She did her best to look calm and serene… and definitely not guilty. But he had to be wondering who she was after that botched background sharing. The way he kept gazing at her—appraising her—made her want to squirm. Fortunately, the soldier next to him spoke, and Zirkander looked away.

“In your experience, sir?” The young man couldn’t have been more than twenty, and he wore a hopeful expression as he prompted the colonel. Though the men were preparing to defend the fortress, nobody appeared that worried by the airship’s appearance. Maybe this happened frequently.

“I might have started a few avalanches,” Zirkander said.

“In your flier? With explosives?”

“Bring me a beer later, and I’ll tell you some stories.”

“Deal, sir!” The young soldier hustled over to help the men with the harpoon launcher.

“Perk of having your name in the papers next to all sorts of war-related exploits… ” Zirkander said. “You never have to buy your own alcohol.”

Sardelle was the only one close enough to hear him, so the comment must have been for her, but the casualness surprised her. One minute he seemed to have her pegged for some kind of spy, and the next he was chatting with her?

Maybe he wants to keep you confused.

I get the feeling he confuses a lot of people.

“I much prefer being the one attacking to the one defending though.” Zirkander lifted a spyglass. “He’s just hovering out there. Scouting mission?”

He seemed to be talking to himself, but Sardelle decided to respond. “Do they come around often?”

The more he talked to her, the more trouble he should have ordering her execution later.

I wouldn’t bet on it. Judging by the so-called witch drownings I witnessed, when it comes to magic, these people will kill their own kin without a second thought.

Sardelle focused on Zirkander’s response instead of Jaxi’s commentary.

“They *shouldn’t*,” he said. “This place is supposed to be a top military secret.” Zirkander lowered the spyglass and gave her an appraising look again, though his gaze soon shifted over her shoulder. “Captain,” he called to the man jogging up behind her. It was the aide who had been introducing him to the fort earlier. And wasn’t he the one who had been tasked with organizing the archives?

If they were on his mind, Sardelle might be able to poke into his thoughts and find out where the room was located and where the empty forms were kept so she could fill one out for herself. She grimaced at the idea of, for the second time today, slipping into someone's mind. There was the risk he would feel it too. She decided to simply open herself up for the moment. Maybe they would discuss the archives and the thoughts would float to the tops of their minds where they might be easily accessed.

"Yes, sir?" the captain asked.

"This happen before?" Zirkander pointed at the airship.

"No, sir. As long as I've been here, no enemy ships have appeared in our airspace. Audacious of them—they're hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean. I wonder where they slipped in past our patrols."

"I wonder that too." Zirkander's jaw tightened.

He wanted to be out there. By now Sardelle had gathered that he was a pilot, and she could have guessed at his thoughts without trying to sense them. She did, however, catch a strong vision from him, an image of a dragon-shaped flying machine, not unlike the one that had dropped him off. But this one was his, and it wasn't alone as it cruised through the air. He led a squadron of other fliers along the shores of Northern Iskandoth—Sardelle had been along those fjords and gray sandy beaches enough times to recognize them, though she had never seen them from above. Zirkander remembered attacking an airship like this one off the coast, blowing up its engine, and bringing it down.

It should have reassured her that she and the colonel were essentially on the same side, having both fought to defend the continent of Iskandia—even if the people called it something different now—but it sank in for the first time that he must also be the descendant of those who had blown up her mountain… annihilated her people.

Zirkander frowned over at her. He couldn't have guessed her thoughts, but maybe he had sensed her skimming the surface of his mind?

She pointed at the airship. "Are your weapons able to reach them from here?"

"No chance," the captain said. "Neither the cannons nor the rocket launchers has that kind of range."

Rocket launchers? Sardelle had never heard of such a thing, but, now that she looked, could see that something more sophisticated than a harpoon lay nestled in the artillery weapon's cradle. She caught Zirkander and the captain looking at her and then at each other.

"Ms. Sordenta," Zirkander said, "I think it's time for you to return to… whatever work you've been assigned to do here. We'll take care

of the intruders."

"I understand," Sardelle said. It would be suspicious if she tried to find an excuse to stay up there.

She walked slowly back to the courtyard though and with hearing that might have been slightly augmented with magic, she caught a few more sentences on her way back to the stairs.

"Find her record, Captain. And find some of the people who arrived on the supply ship yesterday. If nobody remembers her… "

"Think she's a spy, sir?"

"We'll see."

I may have to escape and come back for you, Jaxi. Sardelle paused at the bottom of the stairs, not sure where to go. She hadn't been *assigned* to any work yet, so how was she supposed to go do it?

I understand. And Jaxi did, but she couldn't hide the sadness at the thought of being left behind, and it tore into Sardelle's heart.

There was more at stake too. If the enemy—were these still the Cofah who had troubled the continent in her day?—destroyed this fortress or collapsed the mountains around it, would she ever be able to return? If the mines were shut down, who could possibly help her reach Jaxi? For that matter, who would help her find the belongings—relics—of her people? If she was truly the last of her kind, wasn't it her responsibility to save and preserve some sign of her heritage?

Sardelle dropped her forehead into her hand. So much lost, and she was worried about being thought a spy? What did it even matter?

The captain jogged down the stairs, thoughts of the archive building floating at the top of his mind. Without looking up, Sardelle plucked the location from his mind as well as the layout. He frowned at her when he reached the bottom of the stairs, but all he did was point toward the laundry building.

"One-forty-three will assign you tasks. She's in charge of the women's area."

"I understand," Sardelle said.

Sewing or doing laundry, that would be the perfect time to let her mind wander. She refused to tinker with the memories of those who had arrived yesterday, assuming she could even locate them before the captain questioned them. Creating a record for herself would have to be enough. She gazed up to the rampart where Zirkander had the spyglass out again. With luck, this unprecedented enemy appearance would keep him busy, and he would forget about her.

. . . . .

Ridge walked through the mines, following a stocky infantry lieutenant for a guide, while two of his hulking soldiers trailed behind, each wearing enough armament to assault a fortress on his own. Ridge

felt like a pansy for having bodyguards, but Captain Heriton had nearly pitched over sideways when his new commanding officer had suggested he would take a stroll on his own. After receiving a belated report about an attack on one of the lower levels that morning, Ridge had allowed the escort. Besides, his mind was more on the Cofah airship than this inspection. The craft had left without coming closer or doing anything else, but Ridge had a feeling it would be back. He knew a preliminary scouting mission when he saw it. He didn't know how long they had been searching for the crystal mines, but now that they had found them, there would be trouble. It was no secret what powered the dragon fliers—and that there wasn't an equivalent energy source out there. Maybe someday there would be, but not yet. And without the fliers… his people would have a hard time defending the continent against a superior naval force.

Ridge had written a report, but there was nowhere to send it, not until the next supply ship came in two weeks. Someone had mentioned a pass over the mountains but that it was only accessible during the summer months. How helpful.

"What're they staring at?" the lieutenant muttered, looking back and forth uneasily.

Ridge's group was walking down a wide corridor, and a squad of miners was approaching from the opposite end, on their way off shift, their dirty clothes and weary faces implied. An armed soldier following the workers watched his flock carefully, not saluting—he held his rifle in both hands—but giving Ridge a respectful nod. The miners were staring at Ridge's little troop.

"It's either me or you, Lieutenant," he responded. "You tell me, am I the pretty one or are you?"

The lieutenant cast a glum look over his shoulder. His nose had been broken a time or two in his career—or perhaps before it. "Definitely you, sir."

The miners slowed down, and a few muttered to each other. They wouldn't think to attack him with so many armed men present, would they? All they had for weapons were pickaxes and shovels. Yes, those heavy picks could do damage, but only in close quarters. Of course, in the tunnel, Ridge's group would have to pass within close quarters.

"This is why the general never came down here," the lieutenant muttered, resting a hand on the butt of his pistol. He must have read danger in the troop as well.

The first miner, a scruffy bedraggled man wearing a bloodstained shirt and a bandana around his throat, stepped toward the center of the passage. He removed a sweat-stained cap, pressed it to his chest with one hand, and raised the other—it was devoid of picks or other weapons.

"Colonel Zirkander, sir?" he asked.

"Yes?" Ridge had only been in the fort for a few hours; he hadn't realized the news of his arrival had preceded him down here.

"I, uh, we want you to know… " He waved at his grimy comrades. "We've heard about your fighting out there in the skies. Sometimes someone who can read catches hold of a newspaper, and there's a former pilot down here that tells some stories about your early flights —he claims to have met you, but I'm not sure that's the truth. Still, real entertaining stories. We appreciate them. And that you're out there, fighting for our country." The miner eyed the infantrymen, who had their fingers on the triggers of their rifles. "We just thought you should know."

It was a moment before Ridge could come up with an answer. He'd had the king's subjects thank him for his service before, and received his share of hero worship from young pilots, but he hadn't expected felons to care about their country or those defending it.

Ridge stepped away from the lieutenant, met the man in the middle of the tunnel, and stuck out his hand. "Thank you… "

"One-fourteen," the miner supplied, gripping his hand.

Ridge raised his eyebrows. "And the name your mama gave you?"

The miner blinked a few times. "Kal."

"Thank you, Kal." Ridge walked down the line and shook more hands and got more names and numbers and was surprised at the shyness, considering all the broken noses and missing teeth in the group. "How're you all being treated down here? Tough but fair? Getting enough food?"

With the questions, he opened himself up to a volcano of grievances, but he listened without making too many promises. If the fort was attacked in the future, he needed these men—*all* of the men —to stay put in the mines and not make trouble. That would be asking a lot—he had been a prisoner of war once, and he had used the first diversion he could to escape—but Ridge might need to siphon more of his soldiers into defense.

As he continued his tour, he crossed a lot of apathetic miners who didn't care a yak's back teats about the change of command or him, but he came across even more who knew who he was and seemed to think something special of it. He would use any advantage he could to win over the prisoners. He also found the "pilot" the first miner had mentioned. Ridge had never met him and through a few private questions learned the kid had been kicked out of the flight academy for fighting after three months. Not that surprising. These were all rough men. Ridge didn't doubt for a moment that their deeds had rightfully earned them places here. Fortunately, none of them asked him for parole—he doubted he had the power to grant that even if he

wanted to. When he asked what they did want, most of the requests were ridiculously simple, and he promised to look into them. If a rockslide table, a dartboard, and some pictures of near-naked women would improve morale, he had no problem acquiring them.

A private caught up with Ridge and his entourage somewhere toward the end of the tour. “Sir? Someone was killed up top. You may want to look in on it.”

“Show me,” Ridge said.

How many deaths was that for the day? They were far too common here.

Though nobody had made a threatening move toward Ridge, his escort followed him to the tram.

“What sort of killing was this?” he asked the private as the cage creaked and groaned, heading for the fading light at the end of the passage. Twilight had either come, or the sky had darkened further with clouds.

“A woman was hung for being a witch.”

Ridge’s stomach lurched. The prisoner he had been talking with? Sardelle? She was out of place here, but he didn’t think it had anything to do with witchcraft. He had her pegged as a spy—if a poor one—or, more likely, someone who had sneaked in to try and get a crystal. One could be sold on the black market for a great deal. Or she might even be an academic who wanted a sample for research—the gods knew the military had a stranglehold on the crystals. He knew that university professors had come to the airbase before, with bags full of microscopes and tools, wanting to study them. Few had ever had a close up view, for neither the king nor the commandant wanted information getting out where the country’s enemies might pick it up. Perhaps Sardelle was one of those curious professors who wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Or was it that he simply didn’t *want* her to be some hardened criminal who truly deserved to be here? It wasn’t as if a spy or a thief was much better. A thief… might be turned away with a moderate level of punishment, especially if she didn’t succeed in stealing anything. A spy though… Ridge closed his eyes. He would be forced to shoot a spy.

A moot point if she had already been hung, he reminded himself with another lurch to his stomach. “Do you know the name—number—of the woman who was hung?”

“No, sir,” the private said.

Ridge resisted the urge to describe her for the private. The cage was nearing the top of its ride, the darkening sky visible in earnest now. All around the fortress, the pathway and rampart lanterns had been lit, though they did little to drive back the encroaching night. It

was definitely snowing, thick swirling flakes that would make visibility difficult for anyone flying. Good. He hoped the airship would be forced out of the mountains and into skies where it would be spotted and shot down.

"This way, sir." The private opened the cage and walked into the snow. "It's in the women's barracks."

Ridge strode after the private and found himself outpacing the man, then turning to crunch through the old snow in the courtyard rather than following the walkways—with fresh powder on the ground, they weren't that cleared anymore anyway. He had found maps of the fortress and the mines before his tour and memorized them as well as he could. This was either a shortcut to the barracks or… he was heading for the munitions building. Either way, the private noticed he had lost his C.O. and jogged across the snow after him.

Fortunately, Ridge's memory proved accurate. He pushed open the front door and gave the traditional, "Male on the floor," warning call, though the private's furrowed brow made him think nobody here bothered. Maybe female prisoners were supposed to be used to random men walking into their sleeping and bathing building. From what he had skimmed of the operations manual, courtesies to inmates weren't important enough to be mentioned.

"Third door, sir," the private said.

Ridge could have guessed that by the knot of women standing outside, staring in, gesturing and speaking. Most had removed their heavy outer clothing and appeared to be off-shift for the night. Sardelle wasn't among them.

"Sergeant Benok gave orders that the body not be disturbed," the private said.

"Good," Ridge said, though he wasn't any sort of forensics expert. He certainly wasn't a witchcraft expert.

"Move aside," the private barked to the women, despite the fact that they had already been doing so.

Ridge gave them a more cordial, "Thank you, ladies," though all he wanted to do was charge into the room to check…

It wasn't Sardelle. He told himself that his relief was uncalled for—someone was still dead, choked to death by a rope made from torn and braided linens, dangling from a water pipe crossing the ceiling. The woman's head drooped forward, her snarled brown hair falling into her lean face. It didn't quite hide the swollen lip and lump on the side of her cheek. She wore the heavy wool dress common to the female prisoners, and it covered most of her skin, but tattoos of knots and anchors crossed her knuckles, and more sailing-related artwork disappeared under her sleeves. The tip of one of her pinky fingers had

been cut off at some point in her life, leaving a shiny pink stump. Her feet almost touched the floor, and Ridge guessed her six feet tall. *This* woman he would have believed was a pirate before ending up here.

"Her name?" he asked of the observers.

"Six-ten."

"Her *name*?" Ridge repeated.

"Oh. Uhm." The women glanced at each other.

"Big Bretta," someone said from the back of the crowd.

"Thank you. Private, what led you, or your sergeant, to believe this hanging was a result of witchcraft?"

"The sergeant found some things in her bunk… a collection of people's hair and some crude dolls carved from scraps of wood. It looked like she got caught trying to put hexes on someone."

"She was on the shift with us in the kitchens this morning," someone said in the crowd. "Then she didn't show up this afternoon."

"I'm the one who found her," another woman said. "Came in to collect the towels for washing and… 'bout screamed my head off. Then the soldiers came and took over."

"First one tried to say it was suicide," came an indignant addition. "Big Bretta wasn't that type. She used to defend us from the bas—those that thought they could walk in here and have their way."

"People don't usually punch themselves in the face before committing suicide," Ridge said. "Assuming nothing's been moved, there's no stool or ladder or anything she could have used to climb up there and drop either. Private, where's the sergeant who sent you to find me? And who usually handles murder investigations?" Usually on an installation this small, Ridge wouldn't expect there to be much crime—certainly not many murders—but given the background of his workforce, he supposed it was inevitable.

"It was chow time so the sergeant went to dinner, sir. He said I could go too after I found you." The private shrugged. "Nobody investigates murders of prisoners. Bodies just get put in the crematorium, same as those who die in mine accidents."

"How… efficient."

"Yes, sir. We would have done that with this one, but the sergeant said I should ask you on account of her maybe being a witch and maybe having done some evils before someone got her. Maybe she was even the one who called out and let that enemy ship know where the mines are."

At some point in the conversation, Ridge's fingers had curled into a fist. He didn't want to punch the private—not exactly—but he felt like punching something. On the one hand, he understood that these people were just numbers to those in charge, numbers who had already been assigned a death sentence for their crimes, but on the

other hand, they were here—they had chosen this miserable life and were helping their country find the resources it needed to fight a war. Didn't they deserve some respect for that? More, without those crystals, he never would have had a career, never could have flown. He owed them something surely.

Wind railed at the shutters of the small high windows on the outside wall, stirring Ridge from his thoughts. "I want an investigation."

"Of the witchcraft, sir?"

"I want to know who killed this woman." Ridge smiled without humor. "Maybe I'll let you stuff *him* in the crematorium."

"Him? How do you know it's a him?"

"As strong and capable as these ladies are—" Ridge waved toward the crowd, "—I doubt one of them hefted a six-foot-tall woman up and hung her from that pipe."

The private sucked on his cheek as he considered the dead woman. "All right, but, uhm, what if she was a witch, sir? It wouldn't be right to punish someone for getting rid of one of them."

Ridge had yet to meet anyone with magical powers, witchy or otherwise, and had always suspected most of the people killed for that were innocent, but if this Big Bretta *had* been casting spells on people… He shrugged. "Maybe not, but that's the point of an investigation. To determine the circumstances and to facilitate judging right and wrong."

"All right, but who, sir? Nobody here handles investigations, unless they're about machines or mining accidents."

Ridge was tempted to lead it himself, but running the fort and mitigating the threats from without had to be a priority for him. He wasn't qualified anyway. "We've got a doctor or at least a medic here, right?"

"Yes, sir. Captain Orsom."

"Start with him. I want an examination and to know what happened *before* she was strung up there. He can report his findings to me, and I'll decide who to assign from there."

The private was scratching his head, wearing an I-don't-see-the-point expression, but he said, "Yes, sir." He trooped out of the building.

For all that Ridge had rebelled against the rules imposed by his own superiors during his life, he had to admit there were times when it was nice to simply give orders, knowing they would be obeyed, rather than discussed in a committee.

Ridge headed for the door as well. "We'll leave her until the doctor has a look," he told the women watching him, "then hold the funeral in the morning, if any of you want to say something before… " He

trailed off, in part because he didn't know a euphemism for a cremation—burials, either at sea or in cemeteries, were more standard in the country—and in part because he spotted a new face at the back of the crowd.

Sardelle. She was carrying a half-filled laundry basket, so she hadn't been let off shift yet, but she must have stumbled onto the crowd and taken a look into the washroom. Her expression… Maybe because she was new here or less jaded than the others, she appeared stunned. No, horrified. And scared too.

Ridge thought to say something, offer some reassurance, but she was already backing away, her knuckles white where she gripped the laundry basket. She spun and raced out of the building.

Ridge didn't race after her—the private and all these female onlookers would find that odd or wonder if he suspected her of something—but he had been leaving anyway, so he strode down the hall at a good pace. He opened the door in time to get a blast of cold snow in his face, but also to see her dart into the laundry facility, a few buildings down. He had work to do, but he also felt this urge to go after her and comfort her somehow. Not that he had offered any hugs of condolence to the other women, women who had clearly known the victim. They hadn't seemed to need it though. They had been indignant but not scared or horrified. Most likely, they had seen all too much of this type of situation before. Sardelle was… different.

"Yeah, and that's another problem you have, isn't it?" Ridge muttered.

The private walked out after him, giving him another curious look. *Yes, your new commanding officer talks to himself. Move along, kid. Move along.*

The private shuffled off. Maybe Ridge was too eccentric for this job. At least he didn't have to answer to anyone higher than him. As he considered everything that had happened in the few hours he had been here, everything that was now his responsibility, he wasn't sure if that was the boon he might have once thought it.

Chapter 4

Sardelle dumped her load of laundry in the big steam-powered washing machine—yet another contraption that hadn't existed in her time—and grabbed a pile of towels to fold. Dhasi, the woman in charge of the facility, had told Sardelle she had to stay late since she had started late. After seeing that poor woman strung up in the barracks, she was almost relieved. She would rather be working and have a distraction, rather than lying in her bunk and struggling to get the image out of her head.

Are you upset by the loss of the prisoner or the realization that it could be you?

Both, Jaxi. Sardelle resented the insinuation that she didn't care.

Sorry, I just wasn't sure which tack I should take with my comforting condolences.

I don't need comforting. Didn't she? She had been upset by the grisly death, but also by hearing the colonel say, "Maybe so" when his man had suggested that someone who killed a witch didn't deserve punishment. It hadn't exactly been a heartfelt judgment, but it was a reminder that she dare not let him or anyone else know about her power. And she feared this prison was a microcosm of the world as a whole these days. Would she find Jaxi and escape, only to learn that she would be hunted at every turn if she revealed her powers? Could she hide them forever? Her first training had been as a healer. How could she encounter sickness and injury and not step forward to help if she could? And if she did, would the one she saved then turn around and attack her for using magic? *All right, maybe I need a little comforting.*

He's coming.

What?

But Jaxi didn't answer.

A cold draft swept into the laundry facility. Sardelle peered past the vats of soapy water and drying racks toward the front door. Zirkander had walked in. Complete darkness had fallen beyond the windows, and there were only two other women left in the building, both staying warm over near the furnaces. Zirkander asked a question of

one of them and was directed toward Sardelle's corner.

Uh oh. *Jaxi, was I… being suspicious when he saw me? He wouldn't think I had something to do with the death, would he? I hadn't even seen that woman before.*

If anything, your mouth-hanging-open, caught-in-the-avalanche expression should suggest innocence.

Thanks. I think.

You're welcome. Don't forget to ask him to unbury me from this rubble.

As soon as I figure out how to do that without incriminating myself, I will.

Sardelle kept folding towels as Zirkander headed toward her, weaving past the vats and ducking rows of laundry drying before a fan. She didn't know whether she should pretend she hadn't noticed him or smile and invite him to take a seat on the wicker laundry hamper next to her. She ended up meeting his eyes and giving him a solemn nod.

"Good evening." He waved toward the towels. "Need a hand?"

"I don't know," Sardelle said, surprised by the offer. "Are you experienced?"

"Not at all. Back home, there's a place where I can drop off my entire duffle full of dirty drawers, and they'll have them ready the next day for a mere two nucros. By morning if I promise to bring Ms. Mortenstock mango turnovers from the Palm Flats run." Nothing in Zirkander's smile or tone said he found her suspicious, at least any more so than usual. That was one relief anyway. "I do think I could manage the geometric complexities of making those towel squares though."

Sardelle knew he had more important things to do—for that matter, *she* had more important things to do—but she stepped aside, so there would be room for him beside her at the table. "If you're up to the challenge. Just know I'll be judging you."

His eyebrows rose. "*Really?*"

She blushed. She shouldn't be so familiar with him. It was his fault, she decided, for setting that tone.

"Not harshly. It's my first day, too, after all." Naturally she couldn't mention the magical contraption she had once delivered her own dirty drawers to, one that had washed, dried, and folded, without requiring turnovers or any other kind of compensation.

"You're kind," he murmured, then removed his cap and parka, draping them over a rack, and picked up a towel.

Zirkander, with his friendly tone and smile, had to be there to comfort her, though she couldn't guess why he would bother.

He's attracted to you, genius.

I doubt that. If anything, I'm a puzzle he's trying to solve, which is not a

good thing for either of us. I shouldn't be encouraging him.

Right, and that's why you just shifted over to stand closer to him.

I was reaching for that towel, and have I mentioned how amazing it is that you can spy so effectively from under a mile of solid rock?

No, you don't mention how amazing I am nearly often enough. Listen, just because he's couth enough to look into your eyes instead of at your boobs doesn't mean he doesn't find you attractive. I'd use that if I were you. Make him like you so that if he does *discover your little secret…*

He'll feel particularly bad about shooting me?

"You seemed distraught about Bretta's death," Zirkander said. "Understandably so. I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I was just surprised by the scene." He knew the woman's name? Sardelle hadn't. She felt like a fraud. "And thought of the pain she must have suffered before that ignoble end. There was a time when I trained to be a healer—a doctor—" she glanced at him when she made the correction, not sure if the word "healer" would still have a magical association in this time.

He gazed thoughtfully at her, but she didn't read any suspicion. "I think that might be one of the first true things you've told me."

She blushed again and grew quite focused on the towels. "I'm certain your captain will find my report and verify that I… "

"Belong here?"

Did she want to fight for that? To belong with all these cutthroats and rapists? "That there's nothing unusual about me or the circumstances that led me to come here."

Well, that was vague. No wonder he finds you an enigma.

Hush.

His eyebrows twitched. "I… see." After a moment of silent folding, he spoke again. "I was thinking… This stack is getting high. Where do these go next?"

Sardelle pointed. "In that cart."

Huh. He was actually folding, not simply poking around while he spoke to her.

"I was thinking that since you're also concerned about the welfare of these people," Zirkander said, "that maybe you could keep your ears open and help with the investigation of Bretta's death. Nothing risky, but you could let me know if you hear anything that might not otherwise be said when I'm around. I've never considered myself overly gruff and intimidating, but soldiers tend to make like clams when officers wander past. I'm suspecting miners are the same way."

Sardelle watched him out of the corner of her eye. Was he trying to give her some small task so she wouldn't dwell on the woman's death? Or did he truly want this favor from her? Jaxi's advice aside, she ought to stay away from him—he saw all too clearly through her fibs.

Just because she found him handsome—especially with his cap off and his hair tousled in such a way that made her wonder what it, and the rest of him, might look like when he climbed out of bed in the morning…—didn't mean he wasn't the most dangerous person here.

Despite that acknowledgment, she found herself asking, "So… you would want me to report in to you every morning with the latest gossip?"

"Well, the gossip related to this investigation. Or if you were to see or hear something that suggested… someone or some persons within these walls *were* using witchcraft."

Sardelle's heart forgot to beat. He wanted *her* to let him know if anyone was using magic? She coughed to cover the strangled sound her throat wanted to make.

It must have sounded strangled—or distressed—anyway, for he put a gentle hand on her back and asked, "Are you all right?"

She managed a nod, though his touch flustered her further.

That's what you get for imagining him in bed.

"I'm fine," she said. "I just—"

Zirkander withdrew his hand and waved it dismissively. "Never mind on the witchcraft. I wouldn't want you to get yourself in trouble on my account. They say that back in the old days, those people could read minds."

"Yeah," Sardelle managed, her voice hoarse.

"The last thing I would want is for you to be hurt because someone thought you were a spy." He considered the towel he was folding. "Perhaps this was a bad idea. Even the average prisoner here might get suspicious if you're always wandering up to my office."

"Given what I've seen, heard, and been propositioned with today, I'd guess they would think I was sleeping with you rather than spying for you."

This time, Zirkander made the strangled-distressed noise in his throat. She held back a smirk, though she was somewhat pleased to have broken his equanimity for once.

"That would also be… less than ideal." He glanced toward the furnaces, probably wondering if the other two women had heard, but they had disappeared into the building somewhere or perhaps left for the day. The lanterns in their work area were out now.

"I'm not your type, eh?" Sardelle wasn't sure why she asked it, or why she was making light when the notion had disturbed him.

Jaxi smirked into her mind. *Because you want to know.*

"Oh, you're nice, but it wouldn't be appropriate for an officer—or, as I am now, a glorified prison guard—to take advantage of a prisoner, and whether that was happening or not, the appearance… " Ridge snorted. "You don't know how ironic this is, coming from me,

with my record full of demerits, but they were always honorable demerits. I mean, I could argue that way. Ignoring the rules for the greater good. Or to irk annoying senior officers who deserved irking. I —oh, hells. Never mind. I guess it doesn't matter that much what these idiots think."

Well, you've succeeded in flustering him.

So I see.

Not quite sure whether "you're nice" answers your question though.

Sardelle sighed inwardly. *Me either.*

"So, just to be clear, I am or am not having coffee with you in your office tomorrow morning?"

Zirkander blinked and looked at her—he had been avoiding her eyes for most of the towel folding session. "Does that mean you'll share what you hear?"

"I will, but I feel it would be fair for me to receive a small favor from you as well. Since I will be making your job easier for you." Sardelle smiled.

He smiled too. It was warm and friendly as usual, but there was a keen intensity in his eyes, too, and she almost had the feeling that she had walked into a trap.

He wants an opportunity to observe you and figure out who and what you are. You've just agreed to see him every day. And you're also about to tell him something you want, something that might give him another puzzle piece.

You sound like you don't approve. I'm angling to get you out of here.

I know, but be careful. He's not dumb.

No, I've figured that out.

"Yes?" Zirkander prompted and went back to folding towels. Maybe he realized his eyes had given away too much.

"I would like to see a map of your mines."

"Would you?" He said it more like a statement than a question.

I've seen the map. If you're thinking you could find a spot to dig me out on your own, I'm nowhere near any of their tunnels.

I still want to see it for myself. I have an idea.

Yeah? It better be good. He's going to be suspicious of why you want to see the map.

"Yes, I've studied the civilization that used to live here, inside this mountain. I might have some insight into where you should be digging to find… that which you seek." She almost laughed. Beyond a vague notion of "crystals," she had no idea what they were mining for —more than ore, she was certain of that now, because an enemy vessel wouldn't need to spy on a silver mine. But she suspected it had something to do with what her people had left behind.

Maybe he wants your magical laundry machine.

Funny.

Sardelle mentally pushed Jaxi away, wanting her full concentration, for he was studying her again.

"A half truth this time, I think," Zirkander said.

She gave him her best I'm-too-mature-for-these-games single eyebrow raise, though she doubted he bought it. "I won't answer that other than to say I'm beginning to think *you're* the telepath around here."

Sardelle smiled, but his eyes widened in surprise—no, anger. He grabbed her arm and stepped close, his chest brushing hers as he leaned down and whispered harshly, "Do *not* say such things."

He glanced about the facility again.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, stung by his anger. Even more, she was irritated with herself for turning their playful chat—their cat-and-mouse game—into something darker. "I meant it as a joke. That's all."

He stared down at her, and she could feel his deep breaths, the hardness of his chest beneath his shirt. She didn't ready any defenses, didn't think she would need to, but she was aware of the strength of his grip—of him. His dark eyes bored into hers, no longer playful or speculative, but intense, as if he *were* trying to read her every thought, as if by sheer will he could do so. She looked into his eyes, trying to show him that she hadn't been lying, not this time.

Zirkander glanced down, seemed to realize that he had a lock on her arm, and loosened his grip. He lifted his hand, fingers spread, and stepped back. "I overreacted." He faced the towel table again, though he grasped the edge, his hands still tense and tight. "I apologize. It's just that I've seen careers ruined because of such accusations."

Not his, or he wouldn't be here, but some close friend perhaps.

"Once they've been made, no matter how dubious the source… well, you can't prove a negative, as they say."

Sardelle should have felt mad or at least disgruntled at being manhandled, but the haunted expression on his face made her want to give him a hug instead. "I understand." Before she could think better of it, she laid a hand on his, wanting to ease the tension there. "I shouldn't have said that."

Zirkander eyed her hand, his face inscrutable. Sardelle withdrew it, a little disappointed by his reaction, but she shouldn't have been so presumptuous.

He grabbed his parka and put it on. "I should go. I hope my small assistance with these towels has lightened your load somewhat." He smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes, and bowed slightly.

When he turned away, Sardelle asked, "Are we still—uhm, am I reporting to you in the morning?"

He hesitated for a long moment, and she expected a, "Never mind"

out of his mouth. He glanced toward a dark window. “If you find something to report, I’ll be in the office until nine.”

As he walked away, she was certain he presumed she wouldn’t find anything tonight, that he wouldn’t have to see her again soon. He didn’t want to see her. She didn’t need telepathy to sense that in the stiff way he took his departure. Her stupid comment had changed something.

Too bad.

She wanted to see that map. She *would* find something to report.

. . . . .

He had almost kissed her. The memory from the night before still burned in his thoughts. What in all of the hells had he been thinking? She had made that joke, and after his initial reaction—*over*reaction—he had recognized the humor for what it was, but then he had been standing so close to her, staring into her eyes… and it had been as if he were some sexually starved inmate who couldn’t control himself.

“I have not been out here *nearly* long enough to be that desperate to get with a woman.” Ridge blew on his mug of steaming coffee, fresh from the little stove in the break room downstairs. “Though apparently I’ve been here long enough to start talking to myself.”

At least his door was closed this time. None of his men should hear his solitary conversations.

Ridge took a sip and picked up his pen again. He had the operations manual and the personnel rosters out and was working on a list of things he hoped would improve efficiency and free up more men for defenses. At nine, he was heading to the mine entrances again, this time with an engineer. While he would like to think those people down there wouldn’t take advantage of an enemy attack, not when they seemed to respect him for his exploits in the skies, he couldn’t assume that. He wanted some heavy iron doors built over the tram shafts, doors that could be locked from the outside while his soldiers had to defend the fort. He had been up early and had sketched what he wanted for the engineer.

Actually, he had been up early—and late—thinking those sexually starved inmate thoughts. Though he forced himself to get his work done, his gaze drifted often toward the rolled up map leaning against the end of his desk. He had fished it out as soon as he’d gotten to his office, several hours before dawn, just in case. If she truly wanted to see it, she would come. He would have to make sure she wasn’t lying, telling him some made-up fibs about Bretta’s death, so she could gain access to the information. She wasn’t a good liar, at least she didn’t seem to be. He had to accept that she could be there, trying to gain access to his information by playing inept… or by playing *him*.

Agreeing to show her the map… even as he had done it, he had known he was bordering on treason. The map didn't mention anything about the crystals or where they had been found—he had another map that did that, which he would *not* show her—but it might give her… something. Something she needed. What, he didn't know. That was why he had agreed to it. So he could watch her, see how she reacted, and try to make some guesses.

"Seven gods, Ridge, if she were a man, you would just interrogate her." He rubbed his temple, annoyed because he knew he was right, and more annoyed because he couldn't imagine doing it. He had only known her a day. How had she insinuated herself into his thoughts so? Maybe she was some master seductress. Except she had seemed surprised last night when he had gotten close, startled. If she had sensed when his anger vanished and… other feelings arose, she hadn't shown it. That touch on his hand—the one that had sent an incendiary jolt of electricity through him—had been the purest innocence, an expression of concern. Surely a skilled seductress would have slid a hand around the back of his neck, pulled him down for a kiss, and—

He grunted. "I need an ice bath, not coffee."

A knock came at his door, and he cursed himself. He had been so busy thinking about *other* things that he hadn't heard anyone walking up. "Yeah?" he called, wondering if his visitor had heard him talking to himself. Wondering, too, if his visitor was… she.

Captain Heriton poked his head in. "Sir, I'm never quite sure if that's an invitation to enter."

"I'm rarely doing anything in here that's so scintillating that I can't be interrupted."

"Yes, sir." Heriton pushed the door open wider, but paused again. "I'm not sure that was an invitation, either."

Ridge winked. "Maybe you'll have it figured out by the time I leave."

"I'm hoping I get to leave sooner, sir. Six months left on my orders… " Heriton gazed wistfully out the window.

Understandable. "Come in, Captain. What do you have for me?"

Heriton glanced over his shoulder, shrugged, and came in with a stack of papers. "It's actually what you have for me, sir. Did I understand your memo correctly? You want these… reading lists to go out to the guards to be posted for… the miners?"

"That's right."

"Oh. I thought you might mean it for the soldiers."

"I trust *you* all have a good education already." Ridge waved toward the papers. "I'm trying to improve morale, offer some incentives for them to better themselves."

"Better themselves, sir? To what ends?"

"To work more efficiently for us."

"And, uh, reading the classics will cause that?"

"Call it the crazy colonel's experiment." Ridge was certain the gaming tables would be more popular, but if some of the prisoners *did* start reading… "Those who show an interest might prove themselves worthy of more responsibility. What I'm hoping these changes will ultimately do is give us some trustworthy individuals who might help us—or at least keep others from stabbing us in the back—should we need to funnel all of our resources into defending the fort." And if that didn't work, Ridge had his backup plan. The doors.

"Ah, I see, sir." Heriton did sound a tad less perplexed now. Or at least he had decided to go along with his eccentric C.O. He pointed to the bottom of a page. "And you want to give them a day off if they finish a book?"

"If they can summarize it sufficiently and answer questions that prove they read it. Those are hefty tomes, and those men don't have a lot of free time. There has to be some sort of incentive."

"I think I understand, sir. But, uhm, who's going to quiz the miners?"

"What's the matter, Captain? Haven't *you* read those? They're classics."

"I, uh… a couple."

Ridge grinned.

"I'll familiarize myself with them," Heriton said, though not without a daunted look in his eyes.

"Good. Dismissed."

"Thank you, sir. Oh, I almost forgot. You have another visitor." Heriton pushed open the door, revealing Sardelle standing in the hallway, her lush hair loose about her shoulders, her mouth curving into a tentative smile.

Last night, Ridge had been certain it would be better for his sanity if she didn't come today, but seeing her there made his soul soar. It also made his cheeks flush as his thoughts from the night before reared to the forefront of his mind again. Thank the gods that matronly prison dress didn't do anything to distract him further. Aware of the captain's eyes, Ridge managed to keep his face neutral.

"She *assures* me she's expected." Heriton raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, she's my insider on the magic investigation." Ridge chose the word magic instead of murder, understanding that nobody here seemed concerned about the deaths of miners. Magic, on the other hand, was surely something they could all understand investigating.

Heriton's brows rose higher. "Oh, really? Does that mean you don't need her report anymore?"

"No, I'm still waiting for you to produce it." Ridge smiled and

waved the man out of his office.

Sardelle walked in, her own eyebrows raised. “Have *you* read all the books on that list?”

Ridge lifted his chin. “I’ve read many of them.”

“Many? More than three?”

“No less than five, I assure you.”

She snorted, then a speculative expression bloomed on her face. “A day off for anyone who can summarize a book? For *each* book?”

“That’s the deal I put out, yes.”

“When’s the test?”

“After a day of laundry duty, you’re ready to take off?”

“Oh, more than ready.” Sardelle rubbed her hands together. “Do you have a copy of the list? I’m ready now. I’ll even constrain myself to the ones you’ve read.”

“How do you know you’ve read the ones I’ve read? There are more than a hundred books on that list.” All the classics they had in the meager prison library had gone onto the list. Some of them were as dusty and old as the mountain itself. “I don’t believe you’ve read them all.”

“I’ve read enough for a day off. Or five.”

“Fine.” Ridge pulled his master copy of the sheet out of a file in the bottom desk drawer. “How about *Denhoft’s Theories on Aerodynamic and Aerostatic Flight*?”

Sardelle clasped her hands behind her back. “Written approximately four hundred years ago, the text dealt largely with theory rather than proven scientific experiment. Denhoft theorized that there were two types of flying machines that could allow for lift to overcome gravity… ”

Ridge had to consciously keep his mouth from falling open in surprise as she continued on, offering a precise and accurate summary of the book. He asked a few questions in the end, and she answered them satisfactorily, though with a few hesitations.

“History is more my specialty,” she said before he could compliment her. “I read a lot of the ones in that left row in school.”

Ridge had only read two of them. He started with the ones he knew. She was more animated and confident in her summaries of those books, adding opinions and gesturing with her hands as she described the rise and fall of the imperial dynasties that had claimed this continent before the original tribes had rebelled, declaring themselves an independent sovereign nation and fighting off any aggressors who sought to impose upon them again.

After summarizing the books he knew—and five others he didn’t—she leaned forward again. “Oh, Dusmovan. Have you read his book? It’s a fictional tale, but it’s incredibly detailed, showing the

archaeologist's journey to discover what came of the dragons. He hunted all over the world for fossils that would help explain their sudden passing from our world."

Ridge lifted a hand. It did sound interesting, and he would put it on his own reading list—on the off chance this job gave him any free time—but… "You've already earned eight days off, and I believe you came here this morning on another matter?"

"Oh." Sardelle flushed, the red of her cheeks bringing out her blue eyes.

Ridge wouldn't have minded letting her continue on, but he had that meeting to get to. It had been a surprisingly enlightening interlude though. His earlier theory, that she might be some rogue professor here to hunt for crystals, or even other artifacts, returned to the front of his mind. Would a military spy be that versed in the classics? The classics of *his* continent? Not only that, but she was clearly passionate about history.

"By the way," Ridge said, "this school where you read these books… was it before or after you left your family's shepherd ways to become a pirate?"

Her cheeks dimpled when she smiled, a shy caught-me smile. "Before."

"I never knew a rural education to be so thorough. Your teacher should be commended."

The smile drooped, and something flashed in her eyes. Pain?

"Yes," Sardelle said more somberly. "She was inspiring."

Ridge debated whether to apologize for chancing across some painful past memory, but she spoke again first.

"The murder… it doesn't seem to have had anything to do with magic." Sardelle glanced at his eyes. "Or I should say, the woman, Bretta, had nothing to do with magic. I investigated the so-called magical tools that were, I believe, planted under the blanket in her bunk. According to *Braytok's Compendium of Sorcerers and Sorcerous Artifacts*, a book that isn't on your list but should be, since it could clear up confusion due to ignorance, tools for holding energy, souls, or for performing tasks or enhancing powers must be made from a sturdy enough material to contain energy, generally a metal alloy or diamond or other such gem. Hard rocks occasionally, but not wood. The book says it would combust at the first pouring of energy into it."

Ridge listened attentively, though it made him uncomfortable to hear her speak so openly of magic. That book she had mentioned… nobody outside of an academic setting would ever dare be caught with such a thing. Even then, it made people twitchy. It made *him* twitchy. He had never cared much until the Cofah had started importing those witches or wizards or whatever they called them, and putting them

into the sky where he and his squadron started encountering them. Since then, he had lost… too much.

"Forgive my rambling," Sardelle said. Ridge wondered if she had noticed a reaction in him. He hadn't meant to let anything show. "My point is that dolls made from twigs are hokum. Someone planted those in her bunk to arouse suspicion—or validate what he was going to do—and then sneaked into the barracks when few were around and killed her."

"Any ideas on who?"

Ridge didn't expect her to have learned who in the scant hours since they had last spoken, but when she swallowed and gazed out the window, he realized she did know. So, why the hesitation? He tried to read her face. It was a study of concentration. She seemed to be wrestling with herself.

"Are you afraid he'll come after you for revenge if you tell me?" Ridge asked.

"I'm afraid… he might have genuinely thought she was a witch, and in your—our culture, well, that would have made killing Bretta justifiable, wouldn't it?"

Ridge leaned back, feeling the hardness of his chair against his shoulder blades. He had noticed her slip-up, and it put doubt into his assumptions all over again. More than that, he sensed she was lying.

"Who is it?" Ridge asked. "We'll hear from him and decide the rest." We? It was he, wasn't it? He would have to be judge and juror here. A fact that hadn't been mentioned on his orders.

"I don't know for sure," Sardelle said slowly. "Gossip and hearsay and who saw what, when, you understand."

"Yes… "

"But if you can find out if a man named Tace was missing from his shift yesterday afternoon when this happened, you might have your answer. He might have had help from a second man. I didn't hear the other name."

"Thank you." Ridge wrote the name down. For once a number would have been easier, but Captain Heriton ought to be intimately acquainted with the archives by now. Maybe he would recognize the man. "I'll find him and have him questioned."

Sardelle nodded curtly. Her gaze was still out the window. Ridge waited for her to inquire about the map—she must have seen it rolled up next to his desk, but something was bothering her. All the animation she had shown when reciting the book summaries had drained from her. He felt an urge to comfort her, the same urge that had taken him to the laundry room the night before. This time, he made himself remain where he was.

"Is there something else I should know?" he asked.

Sardelle shook her head and pulled her focus back to him. “No, it’s just… a lamentable situation.”

“Yes.”

Ridge pointed his pen toward the map. “We made a deal. There’s the map. There aren’t many up-to-date copies around, so I trust you’ll understand if I don’t let it leave my office.” Not to mention how many vomit stains and dust bunnies he’d had to clean up to find it wedged against the baseboard behind the couch.

“I understand.” Sardelle still seemed subdued as she came forward and unrolled the map.

Ridge picked up his papers so she could lay it out on his desk.

She did so, using a couple of paperweights to pin down the corners and gazed at it for no more than thirty seconds before issuing an eloquent, “Huh.”

Ridge wasn’t sure what he had expected from her, but that wasn’t it.

“Is that where the ore is?” Sardelle waved toward the section of the mountain where the levels and levels of tunnels snaked around.

Ridge didn’t answer. He would let her look, but he wouldn’t provide intelligence. He was already worried his generosity—or perhaps it was foolishness—would turn into a regret. He had allowed the map deal in the hope that he, in observing her, would learn more about *her* than she did about the facility.

“All the miners mumble about crystals,” she added, looking up at him.

She seemed curious and faintly puzzled. An act? Wasn’t she *here* for the crystals? Whether she was a spy or some kind of archaeological bandit, Ridge had assumed she had come for them. What else was of value in this mountain? Silver was worth something, but it wasn’t that rare an ore. Even if she hadn’t come for the crystals, he found it odd that she could discover a murderer’s name overnight, but didn’t know about something all of the miners knew about. Granted, the women remained up top and handled the domestic duties, but Ridge would be surprised if most of them didn’t know what was in the mountain under them.

“The placement of the tunnels surprises you?” Maybe he could extract some information from her, though what he was fishing for he didn’t truly know.

“According to the books, the people who lived here before… before they were destroyed, they had their home in this part of the mountain.” Sardelle waved to a spot that was mostly off the map. “There were a few tunnels over here, I think, but they were more interested in, well, I suppose I don’t know, but the old road leading to the pass exited from the other side of the mountain. That was the road

more traveled. There wasn't much back here, except a few market stalls in the summers, and a private area for practicing… stuff."

It was all Ridge could do not to blurt out, asking what she was talking about. People who had lived here? Maybe *he* was the one who needed to go around talking to the miners. But no, he had perused a lot of the operating manual, and it didn't mention anything about former inhabitants. It specifically said the crystals were an unexplained phenomenon that had only ever been discovered in this mountain.

"In what book did you find this information? Because I'm certain it's not one of the ones on my list."

"No… something I read at one point. I can't seem to recall the title."

After the morning's memory display, Ridge had a hard time believing she forgot much of anything. Did some university out there know more than the military did about its own secret? Or maybe someone in the military knew… and had forgotten to mention it to Ridge before foisting the command on him. If so, that seemed rude.

"And who were these people who, according to your forgotten source, lived here?" Ridge asked.

Sardelle opened her mouth as if to spout the quick answer, but paused and searched his face for a moment before shrugging and saying, "The Referatu."

A chill ran through him. "The sorcerers." The sorcerers who had tried to take over the continent, to enslave everyone who didn't have their powers. He knew about the purging, about the war that had been fought against them three hundred years ago, but he had never heard that they had come out of a mountain base. Or that this had been it. True, he wasn't a huge academic, having never been interested in more than the military and flying as a kid, but he wasn't completely ignorant either. This was *not* common knowledge. So how did his little spy/thief know?

Sardelle spread her hands. "I assumed you knew. Or at least whoever started mining here knew."

Was she being honest, or was this another lie? His head was starting to hurt. It wasn't even nine in the morning yet; it was too early for headaches.

"These crystals," she said, "are they—"

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, fast, urgent footsteps.

"Sir!" The captain knocked on the door, but Ridge was already on his way to opening it and caught the man, fist raised in the air. "The airship is back," he blurted. "And it's coming closer this time."

Ridge cursed, grabbed his parka, and ran into the hallway, tugging it on as he went. "It's still snowing, isn't it? I thought that would keep

them away."

"It is, sir. And it's not."

"Wonderful."

Chapter 5

Left alone in the colonel's office, Sardelle debated whether to race outside after him or to take the moment to study the map further, in private. A glance had told her that the tunnels were several hundred meters from Jaxi's location—it was only dumb luck that those miners had stumbled upon her. The mage shelters had been located in the deepest part of her people's complex, farthest into the mountain core. A mistake, it had turned out, because so few had made it down there in time.

Only you.

I know. Sardelle touched the map, tracing the lower level tunnels with her fingers. *I think this is about where I was discovered, though this doesn't look like it's been updated to include the passage Tace and his cohort were working on.*

Thinking of them again made her wince. She had agreed to help Zirkander with his investigation on a whim, because she saw her opportunity to barter for a look at the map. She hadn't expected to find out Tace was the murderer… or that Bretta was someone who had denied him sex in the past—and used her brawn to protect the other women from him as well. She certainly couldn't have foreseen the chain of events that would lead him to accuse Bretta of giving him his new and persistent rash. Sardelle might not regret defending herself, but she now wished she had found another way. At the least, she should have later sought the man out—from a distance—and healed what she had inflicted.

Unforeseen consequences. The elders had understood them well. That was why the Circle had never acted as judges over others and had insisted the Referatu be held accountable to the same laws as the people in the rest of the country. Until that handful of sorcerers had gone rogue, believing themselves above the law. They were the ones who had established the fear of magic in the population, a fear that had resulted in… Sardelle gazed out the window toward the mountain, her chest tightening with emotion she had been trying hard to distract herself from. But talking to Zirkander and realizing that no one even remembered the Referatu had been here… *A few unforeseen*

consequences, and I'm the last of my people.

Perhaps noticing Sardelle wasn't thinking of anything constructive, Jaxi directed her back to their current consideration. *If you were to convince the miners to extend that shaft and angle downward approximately fourteen degrees, you would eventually reach my location.*

And how do I convince them of that?

Keep working on the colonel.

The colonel is busy with—

A boom sounded in the distance.

"I thought he wasn't going to use the cannons." But even as she spoke, Sardelle swept her senses out, along the walls and confirmed what her ears should have told her. The explosion had come from farther away. The airship, what else?

Leaving the map on the desk, Sardelle ran through the building and outside. Daylight had come to the mountains, but the heavy clouds and the continuing snow made it feel like perpetual twilight. She struggled to spot the airship and wouldn't have found it at all had she not seen a harpoon—no, Zirkander had called it a rocket—streak away from the rampart. It disappeared into the white sky, but by following its trajectory, she located the intruders. The enemy airship was up near the top of a snow-covered ridge, dropping explosives into the cornice she had noted the day before. Yesterday's fear returned in a surge.

The rocket exploded in the sky below the craft's wooden hull. Whatever force or shrapnel it hurled made the ship rock, tilting on its side for a moment, but the massive oblong balloon stabilized it. The captain must have had a good idea as to the rockets' range and was staying out of it.

Well, he didn't know *her* range.

Sardelle stepped into the shadows of a building and checked around to make sure nobody was watching her. The miners were down in the mountain, and all of the soldiers in the fort were busy grabbing weapons from the armory and running up to the wall to fight. This battle wouldn't be won with firearms though.

Hating that she had to think of herself first, that she dared not be discovered, Sardelle waited long painful seconds so she could time her attack with the soldiers' next one. While a second rocket was loaded and aimed, the airship dropped another bomb.

"Hurry," she whispered.

Finally, the rocket flew away. Sardelle forced herself to wait until it exploded, to see if it might be near enough that shrapnel would account for…

There. Orange light burst against the gray sky, the weapon exploding even closer to the airship than the first. Shrapnel reached

the hull, though not enough to give it more than a few dents and dings.

"Good enough," she muttered. Sardelle drew energy from within and cut a long slash in that balloon.

The envelope was thicker than she realized—it might have held up to shrapnel even if the rockets had struck closer—but it wasn't a match for her power. She wasn't sure how long it would take to deflate, so she cut more holes, little snips and pricks that would appear as shrapnel damage later. With more time, she could have made sure the craft went down, but an ominous rumbling started up. It wasn't coming from the airship but from the mountain behind it. From the snow.

A buzzing wail erupted from a horn at the corner of the fort.

"Avalanche!" someone cried.

I was afraid of that.

Don't get caught, Jaxi warned. *Snow is just as impossible to dig out from under as rock.*

I know. I grew up around here, remember?

Sardelle ignored Jaxi's snarky retort. She took several deep breaths and flexed her hands, like an athlete getting ready for a race. Cutting a hole in a balloon was easy, but this?

With a soulblade in her hand, her power combined with Jaxi's, she might have handled it, but even then, she would have needed time to plan an attack. The snow was already falling, gathering speed, gathering more material as it tumbled down the steep slope. That high up, there were no trees to slow its momentum. Sardelle tried to create invisible barriers to slow it down, but it was like sticking her fingers into a dam to plug up holes as more and more burst open. Then that shelf of snow collapsed completely, rushing down too fast, too powerfully. All she could do was partially divert it away from the fortress, to angle it off to the side, but the installation was at the lowest point in the valley, and even a sorcerer couldn't defy gravity for long.

The tail end of it crushed into the east wall, knocking men down, devouring them. The rocket launcher disappeared, too, and—Sardelle gulped, and whispered a plaintive, "Noooo…"—Zirkander, who had been trying to shove other men away, to push them toward the back side of the fort, was swallowed too. The wave of snow crested the towers and crashed halfway across the courtyard, burying that eastern wall and two of the tram entrances, before tumbling to a stop.

Only vaguely aware that the wounded airship was limping away—and losing altitude as it did so—Sardelle raced for the mountain of snow.

A shovel, Jaxi warned.

What?

You need a tool. Don't do anything—anything else*—that could get you noticed.*

It was good advice, even if she didn't want to heed it. Already she had hesitated, protecting herself instead of simply attacking. If she hadn't, she might have stopped that ship before it dropped that last explosive.

"Shovels," someone yelled. "Get those men out of there!"

Sardelle clambered up the slope with a surge of soldiers, all of them slipping on the ice and snow but desperate to save the men. "The colonel went down here," she yelled. "I was watching, I saw."

She didn't expect anyone to listen to her—Zirkander was the only one who treated her as anything other than a prisoner—but maybe the confidence in her voice convinced them. Three soldiers scrambled over to join her. She pointed, then grabbed a shovel from someone who had brought extras. She *had* seen Zirkander go down, the wave sweeping him from the wall, but she could also sense him beneath several feet of snow. He was alive and not badly hurt, but confused, trying to figure out which way was up, and how much air he had.

Sardelle dug. She had never been caught in an avalanche but had heard from others who had survived. The snow became like cement once it compacted above a person, impossible to dig through. A man had to be dug out by others. She flung snow to the side, planning to do just that.

"You're sure it was here?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Yes," Sardelle said without looking up from her task. They had only gone down two feet. They needed to descend at least four more, but she kept herself from explaining that. Someone would later remember such unlikely precision.

"Because the snow would have moved him," the soldier said.

"I know that. I've already factored it in. There's a… mathematical model that I've studied." There. That sounded plausible, didn't it? For all she knew, there truly was such a thing.

"Just keep digging, Bragt," another soldier said.

Sardelle's hands were already growing raw from the shoveling, but she didn't slow down. Two more feet. They ought to be close, ought to hear something soon. Zirkander should hear them soon and cry out, let them know they were close.

"Stay below," someone's voice came from across the fort. "Just stay down there. We'll let you know when it's safe to come out."

The soldier next to Sardelle grumbled, "If those prisoners get out and try to use this to their advantage… "

"I'll shoot them, no questions asked," another responded. "Sir! Are you down there? Can you hear us?"

A faint muffled groan came from within the jumbled slope of snow.

"I heard him," the soldier cried.

"He's here!"

Soon there were so many shovels digging in, that Sardelle could barely see the snow. Someone grabbed her from behind and pushed her out of the way.

"We'll handle it, woman."

She stumbled and almost fell. She hadn't been digging slowly—there had been no reason to move her.

And you wanted him to see your face first? Jaxi raised a mental eyebrow. *To know you were responsible for pulling him out?*

No. That doesn't matter. Sardelle scowled at the back of the soldier who had replaced her. She was done delivering rashes, but he might look good with his belt unbuckled and his trousers around his ankles. *Maybe a little*, she admitted to Jaxi.

Better he not have reason to later dwell on your uncanny ability to find him.

A collective gasp sounded, then a sigh as a hand reached out.

"It *is* the colonel."

Everyone had joined in to dig him out. Though she hadn't been here for long—and he hadn't been here for… even longer—Sardelle thought she knew Zirkander well enough to guess that he would be annoyed when he realized they had stopped searching for everyone else to focus on him.

The hand was followed by an arm, with no less than four people grasping it. They pulled, and Zirkander's head came next, snow sticking in his hair and frosting his eyebrows. With their help, he clawed himself out of the hole, then collapsed on the slope a few feet away from Sardelle. He dug something out of his pocket, a little wooden carving, and kissed it before returning it to its home.

"Are you all right, sir?" one soldier asked.

"Do you need to see the medic?"

"That was a brilliant shot with the rocket launcher, sir! Did you see? Their balloon was struck, and they were going down."

"Uh, yeah." Zirkander looked dazed, but he pushed the snow out of his hair and recovered enough to point at the slide area. "We have more men under there?"

"Yes, sir. Several others were up on the wall with you and—"

"Then don't stop digging, man. Get them out!"

"Yes, sir!"

The soldiers turned to consider the wide expanse of snow… and hesitated. One spun back toward Sardelle. "She knew where the colonel went down."

"That's right. Did you see any others?"

This drew Zirkander's attention to Sardelle for the first time. She considered how helpful she dared be—how far would they believe her mathematical model? But then she shook her head. People's lives were at stake. To put her own safety ahead of theirs would be cowardly. She already had Bretta's death on her conscience.

Sardelle closed her eyes, seeing beneath the snow with her other senses, judging who had the least air and needed to be dug out soonest.

"One went down over in that area." She walked over and scraped an X in the snow, then backed away, happy to let them shovel. She glanced down at one of her palms. She would have a few blisters to heal when nobody was looking.

A hand reached out and caught her wrist before she could drop it. Zirkander had climbed to his feet, and he stood next to her. He arched his eyebrows at her raw palms. Ah, the wounds were worth it if they meant he knew she had helped dig.

"Nobody else knows about the days off I'm due," Sardelle said. "I had to make sure you got out."

"Of course. Very wise of you."

She eyed his pocket. "You have a lucky charm?"

Zirkander lifted his chin. "Yes, I do. Good thing too. I needed luck today."

Sardelle raised an eyebrow. She wouldn't have taken him for the superstitious sort.

He gave her a sidelong look. "It's not uncommon among pilots. We risk our lives every time we go out. When you've survived as many near misses as I have, you develop your rituals and beliefs, anything that might help things go right. You know it's illogical, but you don't want to tempt fate." He shrugged. "One of the kids in my squad kisses each of his flier's six guns before climbing into the cockpit, even if we're actively being fired upon at the time. Another sniffs spearmint oil because he claims it clears his head. I have a little carving my dad made for me. That's nothing crazy."

"I wasn't judging you, Colonel."

"You raised your eyebrow in that way of yours. I know what that look means by now."

Er, she hadn't realized it was such a signature expression for her. "Actually I think it's sweet that you have a keepsake that your father gave you."

"Uh huh."

"Sir," someone called from behind, his voice turning the word into a couple of extra syllables as he slipped trying to climb.

"Yes, Captain?" Zirkander released Sardelle's wrist.

The officer carried a leather bag. "Were you injured? Do you need

treatment?"

"I'm fine. I wasn't down there long, but stay close. Others might not be so lucky." Zirkander pointed at Sardelle's shovel. "May I?"

The captain—the medic, she presumed—frowned. Sardelle wanted to tell him to lie down and relax as well, but he took her shovel and climbed up the slope to join the others.

A gun fired nearby, and Sardelle jumped. Smoke wafted from a rifle held by a soldier guarding one of the two mine shaft entrances that hadn't been buried by the snow.

"You *will* remain inside until the area out here is safe," he growled.

Zirkander looked back thoughtfully, then called a lieutenant over. "Tell any of those miners who want to come out and help dig that they can have the rest of the day off once we recover all of our people."

"Yes, sir."

"You, woman!" a soldier called from the snow pile. "Did you see where any others went under?"

Sardelle climbed onto the slope and looked around thoughtfully. She knew exactly where the rest of the people were and how many feet of snow was mounded on them, but she didn't want to appear too certain, on the off chance she could yet pass this off as keen observational skills and an understanding of mathematics.

She was in the process of marking another spot when a chill washed over her that had nothing to do with the falling snow. A presence swept down from the mountains, something she recognized but had not expected to feel here. She paused to gaze in the direction the airship had disappeared. She couldn't see anything except falling snow and the vague outline of the closest mountain, but she was certain… she wasn't the only sorcerer out here.

. . . . .

Someone pressed a mug of steaming brown liquid into Ridge's hand. "Coffee?" he asked.

"Close, but stronger," Captain Heriton said. "You look like the survivor of an alligator death roll, sir."

Ridge tugged his blanket more tightly about him and didn't disagree. Any number of people had tried to get him to go inside and warm up, but he wouldn't retreat while people were still being dug out of the snow. Granted, those buried in the avalanche had been retrieved and only the mine entrances remained to be cleared. He sipped from the mug, then twitched an eyebrow at the captain. "Stronger, as in alcoholic?"

"I believe that's the secret ingredient, yes. It's a local drink."

Drinking on duty wasn't allowed, especially when it wasn't even

noon yet, but the sweet liquid did have a bracing effect, warming him from the inside, something he could use at the moment. He doubted he had been buried in that snowdrift for more than ten minutes, but it had seemed an eternity. An eternity of dark lonely helplessness. When the scratches of the shovels had penetrated the snow, he could have danced and shrieked with delight… if he hadn't been pinned, facedown in the ice.

He knew he had Sardelle to thank for his swift retrieval, though he didn't know how she had managed to find him—and so many others since then. Oh, Ridge had seen her walking across the slope, scribbling equations in a notepad, and measuring from points on the wall that hadn't been devoured by snow, but he wasn't sure he believed the show. Oh, well. Who was he to complain if it saved him and his men?

After the last soldier had been pulled from the snow, Ridge had watched Sardelle retreat to the wall of a nearby building. She was gazing thoughtfully to the north. That was the direction in which the airship had disappeared, wasn't it? He had been busy being buried in snow and hadn't seen its final departure route. Someone had cheered him for striking it with that last rocket. Had he truly hit it? He hadn't thought the range nearly far enough. He had been firing out of wistfulness rather than logic, hoping one of the explosions would alarm the pilot and that he would crash into one of those towering peaks.

"Captain, what's the status on the airship?" Ridge asked.

"The balloon was ruptured with the last rocket. It flew off to the north and was losing altitude."

Ridge sucked in a breath. "Was it, now? Did anyone see it crash?"

Heriton shook his head. "The snowfall was too thick. She was high up there too. If it crashed at all, it probably sailed several miles before striking down."

"So it could be smeared all over the side of a mountain right now?"

"You're… smiling, sir. You thinking to send a team out to look for survivors?"

"Survivors? I suppose they could be handy, but I was thinking more of repairing the ship and claiming it for the fort."

"To what end?"

"Gathering intel for one, but we're fish in a basket sitting here. If we had an aircraft, we could at least meet intruders on their own footing. Right now, it's too easy for them to avoid our ground weapons." And Ridge could fly again… Granted, an airship was clumsy and bloated when compared to his dragon flier, but it would help keep him sane if he could escape to the skies once in a while. On scouting missions, of course. Nothing so frivolous as random cloud hopping. "If headquarters had any idea the Cofah were out here, they

would send a squadron to defend this place, but until we can get the word back to them, acquiring an enemy airship is the best we can do."

"What if they don't want to give it up?"

"Well, we'll have to determine that. If they crashed, they might be in bad shape. If they didn't crash, or if they're only slightly damaged, we can expect them to try again."

"That does seem likely." Heriton eyed the mountaintops. They were wreathed in clouds, but that didn't hide the amount of snow already up there, with more falling by the minute. Even now, more avalanches could be created from what was up there.

"I don't suppose there are any fliers hiding anywhere in the fort, are there?" Ridge would far prefer flying over to check on the airship, rather than marching, especially since they didn't know where it had gone down—or even if it had gone down—but he knew even as he asked, that finding a flier here was highly unlikely.

"No, sir. I think… I remember hearing about one that crashed into the other side of Galmok Mountain about ten years ago." The captain waved vaguely. "They couldn't get it flying again, so the crystal was salvaged, and it was left out there to rust."

A less than ideal option. "I'll check on the airship first."

Ridge turned away, already thinking of men he might steal away for a trek across the mountainside.

"*You*, sir?" Heriton asked, stopping him.

"I'm not doing anything particularly useful here." Ridge hefted the mug. "I think the fort can do without an alcohol-swilling, blanket-wrapped commander for a few hours."

"I don't think that's a good idea, sir. If they crashed, and if they survived, they're not going to be happy about their situation. I'm sure they're all armed. Why don't you let me fetch Sergeant Makt and his team?"

"Are any of them pilots?" Ridge knew they weren't—almost everyone here was infantry. He was the logical choice for salvaging an airship, if it could be salvaged, and knowing whether it could be made airworthy.

Heriton scowled. "No, sir, but—"

Ridge lifted a hand. "I'll be careful, Captain. Your concern for me is touching though."

"I just don't want to be left in charge," Heriton grumbled. "Running the base would interfere with my ability to finish organizing the archives."

Ridge smiled. "Your disgruntlement is noted. I'm going to change clothes and see if I can find some snowshoes. Send those infantry fellows up to my office anytime. I'm not above cowering behind hulking young men if trouble comes along."

Heriton looked at the snow-smothered fortress wall where the rocket launcher had once been. “Somehow, I don’t believe that, sir.”

Ridge waved, then headed across the courtyard toward his office. Now that he was determined to go, he wanted to leave as soon as possible, in the hope that they could hike out there and back before dark. A lot of years had passed since his cold-weather survival training at Fort Brisklebell—or Fort Brisk Balls, as the men called it.

A familiar raven-haired woman jogged over to walk next to him. “You’re going out there? After the airship?”

“Were you eavesdropping?” Ridge asked.

Sardelle took a moment to consider her answer—she did that quite often—then said, “I was standing nearby when you were discussing your plans in a normal tone of voice in an open area.”

“So… not eavesdropping?”

“Correct.”

“If we had lowered our voices, would it then have been eavesdropping?” Ridge asked.

“Possibly.” Sardelle looked up at him. They had almost reached his office building. “I’d like to go with you.”

Ridge stopped with his hand on the doorknob. “What? Why?”

If anything, he would have expected her to use his absence to snoop around, perhaps examine that map more thoroughly.

“I… believe it might be more dangerous than you think out there,” Sardelle said.

“Oh?”

That made it seem even more unlikely that she would want to go.

“It’s just a feeling.” She shrugged. “A hunch. Don’t you ever get hunches when you’re out there flying?”

“Yes. I get hunches when dealing with inscrutable blue-eyed women too.” Ridge laid a hand on her shoulder before she could comment. “Stay here where it’s safe—” he glanced at the mountain of snow in the fort, “—safe-*ish*.”

Sardelle’s eyes narrowed with… determination? He couldn’t quite read the emotion, but she didn’t object further when he left her outside, so he could jog in and pack. Ridge decided that, despite what Heriton believed, he would indeed let those muscular infantry boys go first. He couldn’t imagine why Sardelle wanted to go, but given that he had watched her point out the spot where every single man had been buried in the snow, he believed her hunches were worth worrying about.

Chapter 6

Gathering supplies was easy—Sardelle told the people who asked that she was doing it for Zirkander—even if all of the snowshoes had clearly been designed for men much larger than she. Getting out of the fort… that would be harder. There were more soldiers shoveling snow away from the mine entrances than there were standing watch on the ramparts, but there were still eyes in the towers overlooking the main gate, a big iron gate with hinges that squealed like a dying pig when opened.

That's probably intentional. To let everyone know when someone is trying to sneak out.

I'm sure I can quiet them. And unlock them. It's walking out under the noses of those guards that will be hard to do without being seen.

Seen and caught. You're not the most agile person on snowshoes.

Thank you, Jaxi.

Remember the ice dragon sculpting competition? Where you knocked over the table… along with all of the entries?

No.

Truly? I can refresh your memory if you wish, send the details of—

Not necessary. Sardelle stood at the corner of the administration building, watching as Zirkander and his team headed out. They wore snowshoes, carried trekking poles, and wore their weapons on their backs along with stuffed packs—they must believe they might have to spend the night out there.

Sardelle thought about trying to slip in at the end, but even with the snowfall, there was no way those alert soldiers wouldn't notice her. The gate clanged shut. She would give them ten minutes before following, long enough to walk away from the fort and enter the trees. Long enough for the men on watch to return to whatever card or dice games they might be playing.

They're not. They're standing by the windows attentively.

Truly?

Yes. They're depressingly faithful to their duties. Maybe they want to look good for the colonel.

Sardelle flexed her fingers inside her mittens and let her own senses

drift toward the towers. One man stood in each of the ones closest to the gates. They were the main people she needed to worry about. She could either distract them or tweak their thoughts, so they wouldn't remember seeing her. That would require a delicate touch, though, and it would be difficult to do to two people at a time… not to mention the sketchy morality.

Just give them rashes.

That thought… did cross my mind. But perhaps something less painful this time… Sardelle closed her eyes and examined the interiors of the towers. Both had stairs spiraling up to wooden floors at the top where the soldiers stood. The lower level of each tower held a big cast iron stove with neat stacks of firewood under the stairs. A little smoke might do for one, but for two? Too much of a coincidence. In the left tower, a hint of life other than that of the soldier's made her investigate between the floorboards. A family of rats staying warm for the winter. Perhaps they would enjoy a little exercise…

You're not a sorcerer, you're a prankster.

Sardelle snorted. *You say that as if you don't approve. I'm sure you're down there, roasting some chestnuts to snack on while you watch this.*

Possibly.

Sardelle closed the flue on the stove first. She waited until the soldier in that tower started crinkling his nose before sending the rats out from beneath the floor in the second. Soon, a family of six was scampering around the soldier's legs. He cursed and tried swatting at them with his sword before hunting around for a broom. In the other tower, the guard was jogging down the stairs to investigate the stove.

"Time to go," she murmured, and glanced around the courtyard to make sure there wasn't anyone inside looking her way. The snow, which was falling more heavily than ever, made it hard to tell. So long as it made things hard for other people too.

She strode across the packed snow, waved a hand to disengage the lock on the gate, and muffled the squeak of the hinges. After closing it behind her, she strode onto the trail Zirkander's team had left, her snowshoes tucked under her arm. Even with the unwieldy things attached to their boots, the soldiers had sunk down several inches in the fresh powder. Autumn calendar date or not, there had to be at least three feet already snuggled up to the fortress walls.

A quick check showed that the soldier in the stove tower had figured out the flue was the problem. His comrade was still chasing rats, but he would be back at his post shortly. Even with the trail broken, Sardelle floundered in the deep snow as she tried to reach the trees before witnesses showed up. The fortress occupied the only level land in the tiny valley, and she was already angling down a slope. Maybe she should have put her snowshoes on in the courtyard, but

that would have been hard to explain if someone spotted her.

Half running and half floundering and flailing, Sardelle reached the first of the trees. She put several more of the ancient evergreens behind her before stopping to put on the snowshoes. She readjusted her pack and wiped sweat from her brow.

"I've gone a hundred meters, and I'm already thinking about a nap."

Hm? I'm sorry, I wasn't listening. Watching your friend run around after the rats is indeed entertaining.

The most excitement you've seen in three hundred years?

Sadly so. The world is dreadfully boring when you're not awake.

I'll take that as a compliment.

A cold wind whistled across the hillside, whipping at Sardelle's damp skin. She pulled her cap low over her eyes and wrapped her scarf up to her nose, then pushed away from the tree and headed down the trail. The soldiers would probably walk faster than she could, even breaking the trail. She didn't want to catch up with them anyway—explaining her presence and why she had disobeyed Zirkander wouldn't be fun. All she wanted was to be close enough to help if the sorcerer she had sensed attacked the team.

Are you sure you want *to help against someone who might be… a distant relative?*

If he's Cofah, he's no relative of mine.

Not technically true. Their ancestors are the same as yours, back from the dragon-riding days when mages were flying around the world and colonizing it as easily as… well, as easily as they can do today in their airships, I suppose.

I know, Jaxi, but the Cofah were trying to take over our homeland three centuries ago, and that doesn't seem to have changed. Whoever is out there isn't anyone I have anything in common with.

Except magic. Would a day come when she would grow so lonely for her own kind, for those she could speak openly with about the mental arts, that she might seek out sorcerers on other continents, continents that had either never suffered a purge or could boast more survivors from that time period? If so… it wasn't today. She certainly wasn't going to stand aside and let Zirkander get hurt. He was… she didn't know what he was to her exactly, but she knew she didn't want to see him wounded—or worse.

Sardelle waited for a snarky comment, but Jaxi must have been distracted. Maybe she was trying to scout the mountain ahead to see if the airship had indeed crashed—with a sorcerer inside—or if it had escaped into the ether. Sardelle paid more attention to the forest around her, to the towering evergreens stretching toward the sky, the boughs heavy with fresh snow. Now and then an overburdened branch

would drop its load, and the noise would make her jump. There were few other noises out there. Whatever animals lived in the hills had probably gone to ground when the avalanche roared through the mountains.

The path leveled, giving her legs a break—remaining upright while walking across an ever-steepening slope was not an easy task—but it turned to head through a narrow canyon too. She eyed the craggy gray walls and the high perches overhead, wondering if there were any mountain lions about. Because she was looking in that direction, she missed the movement behind a tree to the left of the canyon entrance.

A dark figure jumped out and grabbed her before she could so much as think of defense. An arm wrapped around her waist, tugging her off-balance, and she tumbled against…

"Colonel Zirkander," she gasped, glad she had identified him before her wits had returned and she had launched some attack that would be… hard to explain later.

The grip around her waist loosened, though he didn't let her go. "It *is* you. I didn't think it could be… how'd you get out?"

"Just waited for a moment when nobody was looking."

"I'm going to have to talk to those gate guards." Zirkander released her and propped her back upright on the trail—the snowshoes did make it difficult to maintain one's balance. He touched her pack. "You came prepared."

Sardelle decided not to remind him that she had grown up in the area, not when she had been caught mentioning a town that no longer existed. "Are you going to send me back?"

Zirkander looked back along the trail. If he said yes, turned her around, and swatted her on the backside to get her moving, what choice would she have but to do so?

"No. We've already encountered tracks out here."

"Human tracks?"

He nodded. "A couple of men went most of the way to the fort, presumably to see if the avalanche swallowed us whole or not."

"That means the ship *did* land then."

"Or crash. Come on. We'll find out." He headed into the little canyon.

"Thank you."

"And along the way, you can tell me why you're so eager to come along." Zirkander gave her a long look over his shoulder. "I doubt there are any archaeological dig sites out here."

Sardelle stumbled. She almost asked what made him think she was here as an archeologist, but she caught herself. If he thought she was some academic here to poke through stones, let him. That was a lot

better than being a prisoner. Of course, she had already installed her forged record. It was only a matter of time before that captain stumbled across it.

Just worry about the now, Jaxi suggested. *And be wary of what's ahead. For all we know, that sorcerer could be one of the ones padding about out here.*

Good point.

They passed through the canyon without being jumped on by mountain lions, and a fit, young soldier veered out of the trees to join them on the opposite side. A nametag on his parka read *Oster*.

"Sir?" He looked at Sardelle.

"Our shadow," Zirkander said.

"She's… coming?"

"She seems to be of that opinion."

Oster stared at the colonel, but didn't question him. Sardelle wondered if people would start to, behind his back if not to his face, because of her. She was still dressed in prisoner garb, if with a few extra layers she had piled on for this trek. Even if she had helped with the avalanche retrieval, the soldiers wouldn't necessarily trust her. She hoped the fact that Zirkander seemed to wouldn't make trouble for him.

"You find any more tracks, Corporal?" Zirkander asked.

"No, sir. The two sets over there walked out to the fort and then walked back the same way. They didn't have snowshoes, so it's possible we'll catch them if we hurry."

"Tell the sergeant to go ahead then. I'll catch up. You young warriors would probably like me out of the way for any fighting that comes up anyway."

The corporal hesitated. "We wouldn't want you getting… sniped or —" he glanced at Sardelle, "—anything else, either, sir."

"I'll be fine." Zirkander pulled out the rifle strapped across his pack and held it in front of him. "I'm a fair shot, I'm told."

"Yes, sir." Oster saluted, then jogged down the trail ahead of them.

"I didn't know you could jog in snowshoes," Sardelle said.

"It takes practice."

She wagered Zirkander could have kept up with the younger men and was staying back because of her. She didn't know how she felt about that.

Like a burden?

Not until you mentioned it. Thanks, Jaxi.

Sardelle extended her senses around them as she walked—she hadn't been paying attention earlier, and Zirkander had snuck up on her with embarrassing ease. It wouldn't do to let anyone else approach. They were tramping down a slope toward a canyon, this

one much larger than the other they had passed through. Large enough to hold a crashed airship. Something out there tickled the edge of her senses. Several people, and someone… The sorcerer? Working some magic? He or she didn't seem aware of her, but she pulled back anyway. The magic user seemed busy, but since she had sensed him probing the fortress, he might feel her presence as well.

She wanted to warn Zirkander, not only that the crashed ship and several people were at the other end of the canyon, but about the other sorcerer as well. How, though? She focused on the back of his head, wishing she could will whatever prejudices he had against magic users away. An impossibility, alas. She shook her head. She would have to simply try to help the soldiers when they encountered the airship crew.

Zirkander lifted a hand. "Wait here, please."

He removed his snowshoes, leaned his rifle against a cliff, and scrambled up the rock, the edges and crevices slick with ice and snow. She gaped as he went up forty feet, as if there were a rope there to assist him. Yes, he definitely could have kept up with the young soldiers.

At the top, he crouched, his back to a boulder, and peered toward the valley. The snow had slowed to a few intermittent flurries. "Yes… I thought I smelled smoke. They're here." He clenched his fist. "It doesn't look like they smashed into any trees, but there was definitely some damage done on the way down."

"You really want that ship, don't you?"

"Yes." Zirkander crawled back down, not quite as quickly as he had gone up, but he landed in the snow beside her without falling or appearing in danger of falling at any point. "Some astute bartender would doubtlessly pin this desire back to my childhood days when my father refused to buy a model airship for me."

Astute bartender? Is that what passed for a therapist in the army? "Why wouldn't he buy it for you?"

Zirkander strapped his snowshoes back on as he answered. "He said he didn't want to encourage me—I was already flight mad by five or six—but Mom said we didn't have the money for silly toys. I decided to make one of my own. Out of sticks. It was more of an air-raft." He nodded his readiness and started down the trail again.

"I'm sure it was cute," Sardelle said.

A shot fired in the distance. Zirkander cursed and started jogging. Sardelle did her best to keep up. More shots were fired, all from the direction of that canyon, and she thought he would tear off without her. But he glanced back, saw she was falling behind, and stopped to wait. His hand was clenched about his rifle, and he reminded her of a sled dog, straining at the traces, eager to charge off down the trail.

“You don’t have to wait for me,” Sardelle said. “I’ll catch up. Or maybe hang back and stay out of trouble.”

“Oddly, I don’t believe you.”

Good. She wanted him where she could keep an eye on him anyway. She would try to watch over the other soldiers as well, but Zirkander was… her best hope of freeing Jaxi.

Uh huh. I’m the reason you’re trailing him across the mountain and through a blizzard.

Sardelle waved at the scattering of snowflakes. *This hardly constitutes a blizzard.*

Give it time. You should see the clouds coming in your direction.

She grimaced. Yet more news that would be useful to share with the others, but which she couldn’t.

She extended her senses again, trying to get a feel for the situation ahead, to help their soldiers if she could. There were people at the other end of the canyon, but some had scattered. At this distance, she couldn’t be certain if they were Zirkander’s people or men from the ship. Oster was the only one she recognized. He was farther back, closer to her and Zirkander.

Trees and uneven terrain had forced the trail to twist and wind before it reached the mouth of the canyon, but they were finally entering it. A minute or two had passed since the last shot fired. She sensed…

“They’re leaving.” Sardelle clapped a hand over her mouth, worried she had given away something she shouldn’t have been able to tell from her position.

But Zirkander nodded. “I see it.”

The trees made it difficult to see much of anything, but ah, she needed to look up instead of ahead. That massive balloon was clearing the canopy. If she had damaged it once, maybe she could again, although… the number of people she sensed on it was… high. Over two dozen. Maybe more.

“She’s not nearly as wounded as I had hoped,” Zirkander said.

No, a sorcerer could make short work of repairs.

A few people moved about on the deck, beneath the shadow of the balloon. From Sardelle’s angle, she could only see those closest to the railing, but she squinted, hoping to catch sight of the magic user, wanting a look at her opponent. What she saw was someone with a spyglass, standing next to someone with a rifle, looking down at them.

“Look out,” she whispered, backing toward a tree—or trying. The oversized snowshoes tangled beneath her feet, and she tumbled to the ground in the middle of the trail… in clear sight for those on the ship.

A shot fired, and she flung an arm out, forming an invisible barrier in the air around her. A clunk-clang sounded, another bullet being

chambered, and a second shot fired on the heels of the first. Belatedly, Sardelle realized it was Zirkander shooting, not those on the ship. In fact… one man had already disappeared from sight. The second, clutching his chest, toppled backward, falling from her view.

Zirkander leaned toward her, and she dropped her shield before he bumped into it. He picked her up and carried her behind a couple of thick trees before setting her on her feet.

"Thanks," Sardelle said. "I forgot I was wearing these clunky things."

"They're definitely awkward." He was standing beside her protectively, his arm around her back, but his gaze was toward the sky. Carried on the currents, the ship had already drifted out of view.

"I'm sorry you didn't get your salvage," she said. Or maybe not… What if she ripped the balloon again? Sure, there were no rockets to hide her sabotage, but with the trees blocking the view, who would know what had happened?

She closed her eyes, envisioning that balloon, and tried to cut a hole as she had before. This time, it didn't work. She sensed the why right away. There was a protective film about it, not unlike the barrier she had just thrown up. The sorcerer. He knew she was out there and wasn't going to be caught unaware again.

A screech came out of the depths of the canyon, eerie and hair-raising. Sardelle gulped. "Was that… a cat?"

There had been mountain lions and wolves in the Ice Blades in her day, and she had heard both, but this sounded like something different. Something less… mortal.

"Almost sounds like a hawk," Zirkander said. "A really loud, creepier-than-a-haunted-battlefield hawk. Let's find the other men and get back to the fort. There's nothing left for us here."

The screech sounded again, closer this time. It reverberated from the canyon walls and seemed to hang on the breeze for an eternity. Something about it made Sardelle want to spring in the opposite direction and let those soldiers find their own way home. Zirkander didn't shy away though, and she strode after him.

She searched the valley with her senses, hoping to find the creature and identify it. Or maybe just find it so they could better avoid it. She sensed the men. They had been spread out, trying to sneak up on the ship as its crew finished repairs. They were angling back toward each other now, though two seemed to have lost their way in the snow and trees—or maybe they were intentionally looking for the source of those cries. Sardelle shuddered. She wouldn't.

Oddly, she couldn't find it even with her mage senses. The screech sounded one more time, so she knew the cat or hawk or whatever it was hadn't left the canyon, but she couldn't feel anything in the

direction the noise had come from. Or where it had *seemed* to come from. The way it reverberated from the rocky walls made it hard to tell.

Two shots fired.

"They're not shooting at some animal, are they?" Zirkander didn't sound out of breath from their charge into the canyon.

Sardelle was too busy gulping air to respond.

"Unless the airship left some men behind," Zirkander added.

"I don't think so." Sardelle didn't sense any people in the canyon, other than those on the colonel's team. "It seemed pretty full," she added, when he glanced back at her. Minus the two men he had shot… They wouldn't be happy about that. She hoped the craft wasn't heading back to attack the fort. It had flown off in the opposite direction, but that might not mean anything.

"Colonel Zirkander?" came a call from their left. Boulders and the cliffs of the canyon wall were visible beyond the snowy trees, but Sardelle didn't see the speaker.

"Coming," Zirkander called. He veered off the trail. "They must think we're alone if they're shouting," he added more quietly. "But what are they shooting at then?"

The screech sounded again, as if to answer his question. It sounded like it was coming from the sky rather than the canyon floor, or maybe some precipice up the cliffs. Once again, Sardelle tried to find it, but the only life she sensed was that of the soldiers and of a few rodents and chipmunks, most burrowed beneath the snow. She counted four soldiers. Hadn't there been five before? Maybe she had been mistaken.

"How many men are out here with you?" Sardelle asked.

"Five."

Uh oh. Either someone had gotten separated from the group, or…

The parkas of two of the men came into view through the trees. If not for the contrast of the white ground, Sardelle might have missed them. It was growing dark, with the snow picking up again.

One of the soldiers lifted a solemn hand at their approach. "It's Nakkithor, sir."

"What happened, Sergeant?" Zirkander asked.

"We're… not sure."

"We didn't see it," the second soldier said. "Nak was behind us, maybe ten meters back, at least that's what I thought. Then we heard his screams. We ran back and… "

Sardelle tried to see past Zirkander without leaving the trail he was breaking. The drifts hugging the trees to either side were above her waist. It took a moment before she located the man they were talking about. The soldier lay unmoving on the ground in a tiny clearing, his

body half hidden by a tangle of thorny brambles on one edge. Dark crimson stains spattered the snow. She didn't have to take a closer look to know he was dead.

"I swear I saw something, some shadow running or flying away," the sergeant said. Sardelle squinted through the gloom to pick out the names on their parkas. Makt. "It was big and moving fast, whatever it was. I shot twice, then realized it might be you."

"I haven't managed to move that fast out here," Zirkander said, stopping beside the body. "It wasn't me."

"I thought I hit… whatever it was, but it didn't cry out. It just disappeared behind the trees."

"Rav and Oster went to look," the second man, Eringroad, said. "See if they could find tracks or a sign that we'd hit it. As you can see, there's nothing around here except our snowshoe marks."

"Are you sure they're all our prints?" Zirkander asked. "The Cofah could have had snowshoes too."

"Fairly certain, sir. We saw the ship take off and searched around it. No one seemed to have been left behind."

"No *one*."

While the men debated, Sardelle mentally braced herself and walked up to the side of the body. She couldn't believe she hadn't sensed something that was big enough to kill a man, and to kill him swiftly it sounded like. His face had been ravaged by claws or—she thought of Zirkander's hawk guess—talons. The eyes were missing, gouged out, the holes so deep they revealed brain matter beneath them. The front of his parka was shredded, his flesh cut open, entrails torn free and slumped into the snow.

Sardelle took a long breath, glad the air was so fresh and cold. As a healer, she had seen death before, and all manner of wounds, but this was a particularly grisly display. Had she arrived earlier, maybe she could have saved him, but maybe not. He must have died quickly from those extensive wounds.

"Looks like the attack came from the air," Zirkander said. He wasn't unmoved by the death, she sensed, but his words came out calm and detached. This would be an analytical discussion, not an emotional one.

Makt glanced at him. "That's what I thought, sir. But I wasn't sure… I didn't want to sound stupid. I reckon there's eagles and other big raptors up here, but an eagle couldn't do this, could it? And even if it could, why would it?"

"Why, indeed?" Zirkander looked to Sardelle. Did he think she would have the answer? He couldn't possibly think she was somehow responsible, could he? Maybe he had figured out that her powers were more than academic. Or maybe he thought it suspicious that she had

run after the group. “Are you all right?” he asked, flexing his mittened fingers toward the body.

Oh. Concern. Not suspicion. Not yet.

She looked at his hand but not at the body. She had seen enough. “I’m… ” Fine? That seemed a ludicrous thing to proclaim with a mauled soldier at her feet. She simply nodded to finish her answer.

Snow crunched, heralding the return of the other two men, their rifles in their hands. They were shaking their heads before they reached the colonel.

“We didn’t see anything.”

“Not so much as a tuft of fur.” Oster glanced at Makt. “Or a feather.”

“It’s getting dark though.” The first man eyed the metal gray sky above the pines and firs. Thick flakes wafted down peacefully, unperturbed by the death below. “If there had been drops of blood out there, they would have been hard to pick out.”

“Should we head back, sir?” Oster asked. “Even darker clouds are heading this way, and there’s a lot of wind coming across the canyon up above. The airship had to fight to head off to the north.”

Zirkander was staring down at the body, a fist pressed to his mouth. “Yes, there’s nothing for us out here now.”

Except a mystery. Sardelle couldn’t believe something had slipped past her awareness. Something deadly. Was it possible the airship sorcerer had masked it somehow?

“Let’s make a travois so we can haul him back,” Zirkander said. “I’m not leaving his body out here to the animals.”

“Yes, sir,” Oster said. “Rav, you got an axe? Use those saplings to __”

A screech ripped through the forest.

It wasn’t in the distance this time, but nearby, overhead. Sardelle searched the clouds, her hand balled into a fist, ready to unleash an attack. Even in the small clearing, the trees fenced them in, and little of the dark sky was visible.

“Cover,” Zirkander barked.

The soldiers split into twos and lunged behind trees, then knelt, their rifles pointing to the sky. Zirkander started for a tree of his own, but saw Sardelle wasn’t moving and grabbed her. Just as he was pulling her away, she glimpsed massive outstretched wings high overhead, the dark shape seeming more shadow than substance against the snow and clouds.

“There,” she cried at the same time as two rifles fired.

Zirkander pushed her toward a pair of trees. “Stay between them,” he ordered, even as he took two steps in the other direction and raised his own firearm to the sky.

The bird—no, it was far too large to call it a bird—had swooped out of sight almost as soon as they had spotted it, but it came back around, higher. Even with the poor visibility, Sardelle would have expected the men's bullets to hit it, but the creature never flinched, never altered its flight path. It was climbing higher and higher. Readying for a dive.

She still couldn't sense it, and that perplexed her but didn't keep her from preparing an attack of her own. Shots rang out from all of the rifles. The massive bird pulled in its wings to dive, like an osprey arrowing into a lake for a fish, except its target was Zirkander. Sardelle pulled wind from the coming storm, channeled it, and slammed it into the plummeting creature. It was flung to the side, hurled into a stout pine.

Sardelle blew out a quick relieved breath. She had feared that since she couldn't sense it, she wouldn't be able to strike it, as if it were some kind of illusion. The great bird—it had the markings of a barred owl, not a hawk, but it was nearly as tall as a man—recovered before it hit the ground, thrusting its wings out to beat at the air, to pull itself back into the night sky.

All through this, the soldiers were firing, their spent casings leaping from their rifles and burning holes into the snow all around them. The creature climbed back into the sky, not fleeing from the barrage but preparing to dive again.

"Who hit it?" one soldier shouted. "Where did you aim to make it fly sideways?"

"We've *all* hit it," another responded. "The bullets are bouncing off—I saw mine strike and veer off as if that thing were solid metal."

"Someone hurt it though—it crashed for a moment. If we could all target that spot."

"That wasn't a bullet, you idiot. That was the wind."

Technically true.

Jaxi! What is this thing? Someone's familiar? Someone's extremely enhanced *familiar?*

I believe you're looking at a Dakrovian shaman's animal companion.

Dakrovian! From the jungles in the southern hemisphere? That's thousands of miles from Cofah.

Jaxi offered a mental shrug. *Perhaps they went recruiting.*

"Sir! Look out. It's dropping again."

"I see it." Zirkander jumped to his feet and ran toward Sardelle's trees.

He ducked around the biggest one and fished into his ammo pouch to reload his rifle.

Nobody except the dead soldier remained in the tiny clearing, but that didn't keep the giant owl from diving down again. Though

Sardelle knew she risked what little of her confusing cover story remained by using magic, she hurled another funnel of wind at it. The bullets weren't doing anything. *Someone* had to drive it away.

But the bird somehow sensed her attack and dodged. The blast of wind barely ruffled its feathers. It dropped to within two feet of the ground, then impossibly turned the dive into an upward swoop, pulling out at the last moment. No, not pulling out… and not turning upward. It streaked horizontally, paralleling the ground, its dive taking it toward the trees two of the soldiers hid behind.

"Look out!" someone yelled.

More shots rang out, though the soldiers must have realized by then that they couldn't hurt it. Zirkander yanked out a foot-long dagger and charged toward the creature. The soldiers leaped to the side, avoiding the owl's attack in time, but only because the stout firs slowed their avian attacker. One ran around a tree and clubbed the owl in the wing as it shifted from flying to standing, its spread talons enough to keep it from sinking into the snow. The soldier's attack did nothing to hurt it. It flung its wing out, the tip catching him and hurling him ten feet.

Zirkander ran at it from behind, fast enough, even with the snowshoes, to surprise it. He leaped onto its back and tried to sink his long dagger into its neck. As with the bullets, the blade bounced off. Its head spun around a hundred and eighty degrees. That must have been alarming—it was suddenly staring right at Zirkander—but he attacked it without hesitation, this time aiming for one of its great yellow eyes.

Sardelle had her own hand raised, trying to think of some attack she dared make while Zirkander was right on top of it, but she paused, hoping he had guessed right and that the eye represented some vulnerability.

The blade started to sink in. At least she thought it did—it was hard to tell. At the first touch, the owl shook its head vigorously. Zirkander didn't let go of the weapon. He tried to push it in deeper, but was thrown free. He landed hard on his back. The creature jumped after him, seeming to rear up to an impossible height as it spread its wings.

Sardelle tried to find its heart, to wrap the fingers of her mind around it to stop it from beating, but again her senses told her nothing was there. A soldier ran out, an axe in his hand, as if that would do what the bullets hadn't. The bird ignored the man and attacked Zirkander, plunging downward with its beak.

Sardelle cursed, knowing she would be too late as she tore a heavy branch from the tree above the owl, hoping to bring it down onto the creature's head. Zirkander had already rolled to the side and leaped up, not as helpless as he had appeared.

The branch landed, flinging snow everywhere, and surprised him as much as the creature. He recovered first and hurled his dagger. The weapon struck the owl's eye, but in throwing the attack, he exposed himself an instant too long. A talon flashed up, striking like lightning as it ripped into his parka. Zirkander leaped back, but blood sprayed the snow around him.

Sardelle growled, prepared to drop an entire tree on the bird's head, and to the hells with what anyone saw, but it was flinging its head about and screeching now. The dagger was stuck in its eye. For a moment, she thought it might be a killing blow, or at least a seriously wounding one, but the creature used a talon to bat it away. The weapon landed point first in the snow. The owl leaped into the air, raking the axe-wielding soldier with its talons, too, before it flapped its wings and climbed out of reach again.

"Sir, Rav, are you all right?" Makt ran out from behind the trees on the other side of the clearing.

"Just a scratch," Zirkander said.

Sure, a scratch that had left blood all over the snow. Sardelle started toward him, but the owl screeched again. It wasn't done with them. It was circling and rising again, preparing for another dive.

"Let's get out of here." Zirkander pointed to the rocky canyon wall. "Are there any caves or fissures in that cliff?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Go, look. There's nothing for us to gain by fighting this thing."

And everything to lose.

"Yes, sir."

"It's starting another dive," one of the men said.

"Go, go." Zirkander waved the men forward and reached back toward Sardelle.

She had thought to linger, to try dropping a tree on it when the men were out of sight, but Zirkander was like a sheep dog, gathering his flock. Nothing in his expression said he would let her loiter.

She hustled after him. A tree probably wouldn't kill that creature anyway. Not unless she could ram the trunk through its eye.

The owl swooped again when it reached the ground, trying to dart through the forest after them. Zirkander and the soldiers weaved into the thickest areas. Even the powerful creature couldn't rip trees aside with its talons. It returned to the sky, tracking them from above. There was a bare stretch near the cliff wall. They would have to be careful crossing it.

"There's a big crack." Someone pointed.

"Might be a cave."

"Another hole over there. Impossible to tell without looking."

"It's too dark to tell either way. That's just a big shadow, I think."

Zirkander looked up. Yes, the creature was up there, banking and turning, flying back and forth. Waiting.

Sardelle skimmed the craggy rocks with her mind. That spot was too shallow, that one too narrow to get into, that one large enough that the owl could follow. A dozen meters to the left, there were two little caves that should work, each with just enough space for two or three men to squeeze into.

"Down there." Sardelle pointed. "I've studied geology. Those are Brackenforth Fissures. They'll be narrow but deep."

One of the soldiers snorted. "Is she joking?"

"It's going to dive again." Oster stabbed his rifle toward the black sky.

Sardelle ran toward the caves she knew were deep enough. Zirkander cursed and ran after her, yelling, "Find hiding," to the soldiers.

"I ought to tackle you," he growled, his voice right behind her. He could have. She definitely wasn't fast on the snowshoes.

"Not a good time." Sardelle waved to the sky without pausing, then climbed up the cliff face. She tried to anyway. She couldn't manage with the big, clumsy shoes on. She bent, unbuckling them as fast as she could, and hurled another buffet of wind at the owl as she did so. It was already diving, choosing her as a target since she had been foolish enough to run out first.

Rifles fired. Those soldiers never gave up. Fortunately, Sardelle's attack clipped the owl's side this time, diverting it a few meters. Its screech filled their ears, as it nearly slammed into the rocks at the base of the cliff.

Sardelle scrambled up without glancing at it, aiming for the first little cave, the smaller of the two. Zirkander was right beside her, shadowing her, protecting her. She slipped twice, her mittens falling away from the icy rocks when she tried to grab them, but Zirkander caught her both times, holding her up until she found a new grip.

The creature recovered from its near crash, rising again, readying itself for another dive. The soldiers were farther down the cliff—they had gone for the caves directly in front of the area where they had come out of the trees. Sardelle hoped they found sufficient cover there.

"Here," she said, and squeezed through a crack. It smelled of mildew and cold but nothing more ominous. She had already checked to make sure nothing was making a den inside. She crawled to the back—which was all of six feet from the front—and tried to make herself small so Zirkander would have room.

His rifle clunked against the rock, and clothing rasped and ripped. His body blocked the mouth of the cave as he grunted, trying to

wedge himself in, and full darkness filled the small space.

"Can you make it?" Sardelle asked. She had thought it would be big enough, but he was taller and broader of shoulder than she was. Reluctantly, she said, "There's another fissure a few feet up if you can't." She didn't want to spend the night alone in the cave.

More like, you don't want to spend the night alone in the cave without his company.

Hush. This is about keeping everyone alive, nothing more.

Uh huh.

This space isn't big enough for anything more anyway. Not that Sardelle seriously thought Zirkander would contemplate "anything more" even if this *were* the time and the place. She was his little puzzle to be solved, nothing more. If he was protecting her, it was simply because he would do that for any woman.

"I'm in." Zirkander leaned out. "Find a place, Rav! It's coming."

Sardelle checked the others. They had found a cave big enough for three, but they weren't able to fit the other soldier inside.

"Trying, sir!" came the distant call.

Zirkander wriggled his rifle back out. He was poised like a panther on a tree branch, muscles bunched, ready to spring. Sardelle resisted the urge to tell him he couldn't do anything to drive off the owl. He wouldn't appreciate it. She couldn't do anything either, if she couldn't see it, which she couldn't from the back of the cave. Even when she *could* see it, she hadn't been able to do much. She needed to dig out books on those jungle shamans when she got home.

Home?

Well, back. They're buried down there somewhere, right?

Possibly, though I do hope you'll make my retrieval your priority.

We'll see.

"There's room over here," Zirkander yelled.

Sardelle crept forward, found a rock to stand on, and tried to see past his shoulder. If she could locate the owl, she could attack it with wind again. She could—

"He got in." Zirkander turned and bumped into her.

She fell off the rock and grabbed the nearest thing—his shoulder. "Sorry," she said, stepping down. "I was trying to see out."

"And here I thought you were overcome by the euphoria of surviving and wanted to fling your arms around me for a kiss."

"I… " Did he *want* that? No, his tone was dry. A joke, nothing more. "Look out," she cried as a shadow blotted out the night forest behind him.

The dreadful screech filled the tiny cave, hammering Sardelle's eardrums. She stumbled back, pulling Zirkander with her. He needed no urging. Talons scraped and tore at the rock around the entrance.

He pressed himself against the back of the fissure, grunting as he shifted about to face the entrance, positioning himself so he was between her and the creature.

With its wings tucked in, the owl wasn't much bigger than the men. If it could climb in…

Sardelle gulped, terrified she had led them to a trap rather than a haven. She summoned her energy to batter at it again, but one of its talons slipped, and it disappeared amid a flurry of wing beats. It soon returned, beating at the mouth of the cave. Sardelle examined the top of the cliff above her. The snow-covered top of the cliff. She nudged a drift over the edge. It wouldn't hurt the owl, but maybe…

Big clumps of snow rained down on it. The creature shrieked and disappeared from view.

"I do not like that noise," Sardelle said. She hoped the others' cave entrances were narrow enough that the owl would have no chance at getting to them.

"Now I know what my mother meant all the times she used the term ear-drilling to me," Zirkander said.

"In relation to what?"

"My learning to play the trombone one summer. *I* thought I sounded fabulous."

Sardelle smiled despite their situation. She had no idea how they were going to escape that owl, but couldn't think of anyone else she would rather be trapped with at the moment.

Chapter 7

"Sir?" came a distant call.

Ridge left Sardelle—he had been smashing her anyway—and returned to the front of the cave, grunting as his foot caught on rock. Their shelter lacked a flat floor. "We're fine, Rav," he called back. "Everyone there make it?"

"We're all in, but, uhm, the owl… it's sitting out there waiting in a tree branch."

"With luck, it'll get bored of waiting and leave."

The soldier's "Yes, sir" sounded encouraged, but the follow-up of, "What if it doesn't?" was a little more plaintive.

"We'll figure it out in the morning," Ridge called. Dropping his voice, he asked, "Owls are nocturnal, right?"

"Regular owls, yes," Sardelle said. "I'm less certain about magical ones."

Ridge digested that. "So it *is* magical. I didn't think it could be natural, but… I've never heard of anything like this."

After a pause, Sardelle asked, "It wasn't in the operations manual?"

"No."

"I'm guessing it belonged to… someone on that ship."

"A ship that is now free to go back and harass the fort without me there." Ridge slapped the wall with his hand. Damned fool's errand, that's what this had been. He had lost a man, and now the fort might be in danger again.

"I'm sorry," Sardelle said softly.

"Not your fault." Ridge hadn't figured out yet why she had come out here—or how in all the levels of all the hells she had managed to sneak out past his men—but she hadn't been a burden. She had pushed herself to keep up and hadn't complained about the pace. She had even been right about the cave. He snorted. Brackenforth Fissures. He would have to look that up when he got back to the fort—*if* there was a fort to return to. He growled at himself. All this because he had wanted the airship. What had he thought would happen? That the crew would all be dead, and he could simply salvage it for himself? At the least, he had hoped they wouldn't be able to put up much of a

fight. But that ship had been well manned, and it was uncanny how quickly the Cofah had repaired it. He wondered…

"So if someone on that ship has a giant magical owl, does that then mean that said person has magical powers of his own?" Ridge didn't know when he had started to think of Sardelle as his guide to all things arcane, but she had read at least one book on the topic, and that was one more book than he had read.

"His or her own, yes," Sardelle said. "It would take someone with… an alarming amount of power to command such a beast." Concern laced her words. Thus far, she had faced everything with a calm demeanor. This was the first time she had sounded worried.

And that worried *him*. What he had assumed was a simple Cofah scouting mission looked like it was much more. A well-equipped ship that had apparently come with the mission to bury the fort—and the mining operation—beneath snow and rock.

Frigid wind whistled through the canyon. It was going to be a stormy night. He hoped the owl got cold. And knocked off its branch by a gust.

Clothing rubbed against rock as Sardelle shifted positions. She patted around, grunting a couple of times as she hit rocks, and settled on the ground between the entrance and the back wall. It was the widest spot in their little prison. "I don't seem to have picked out a very comfortable cave."

"I'm not sure any cave would be comfortable on a night like tonight." Ridge waved toward the snow—it was falling sideways now, driven by the wind. "The temperature's going to drop. Too bad the owl wasn't considerate enough to let us gather some firewood on the way in."

"Yes, I've heard magical owls are very rude."

"That's in that book you were quoting, eh?"

"Actually… no. I was joking. I know very little about magical owls, I'm afraid."

"Hm." Ridge debated between sitting down beside her and standing there, keeping watch. What he was keeping watch over, he didn't know—with the increased snowfall, he couldn't see the owl, or much of anything. He just felt like he should be vigilant. He had already… done enough wrong tonight. His chest ached though, reminding him of the scratches—as if the icy air creeping through the torn parka and shirt weren't enough of a reminder. He ought to dig out bandages. And antiseptic. For all he knew, magical owl claws could give a man rabies.

"How's your injury?" Sardelle asked. "Do you want me to bandage it?"

Odd, it was almost as if she knew what he had been thinking.

Maybe she had simply seen him touch his chest, though he didn't remember doing so. "It does sting a little. I was debating whether one could get an infection from magical critters."

"If its talons were dirty, well, dirt's dirt. Better on the outside than in your cuts." Sardelle shifted about, opening her pack probably. "I grabbed one of the first-aid kits from the room that had the snowshoes. Do you want to sit down?"

"Not only did you sneak out of my fort, but you fully supplied yourself for the road before doing so. I'm definitely going to have a talk with my men when we get back." Though he felt a little disgruntled at this failing—every failing of a soldier was a reflection of his commanding officer, after all—he patted his way over to her and sat down. It *did* feel good to slump against the wall, to rest.

"It's not their fault," Sardelle said.

"No? You're just so amazingly talented in the art of stealth that they can't be blamed?"

"Something like that. Hm, what I did *not* bring is a candle or a match. I don't suppose you have something in your pack? This would be easier with light."

Ridge dragged his gear over. He took off his mittens to unbuckle the straps and dipped into an outer pouch to fish out a small travel lantern and his box of fire-starters.

"I can do that." Sardelle found the equipment in his hands. She had taken off her gloves as well, and the touch of her skin against his was… nice. "You can relax and be the patient."

"Careful. If you demonstrate a good bedside manner, I'll let the medic put you to work in the infirmary."

"That would actually be a suitable position for me." Yes, she had mentioned training to be a doctor once, hadn't she?

"You wouldn't miss folding towels in the laundry room?"

"Not particularly." Flint rasped, and sparks fluttered down to land on the soft fuzz from the fire-starting kit. The soft orange light revealed her face, none-the-worse for the afternoon's activities. She blew on the sparks, producing a flame, and lit the lantern. "This cave is small enough that this flame and our body heat might keep us warm for the night."

"Our body heat, huh?"

She smiled at him. "Yes. Now take your shirt off, please."

"Uhh." Ridge could feel the coldness of the rock wall behind him even through his parka. "How about I just lift it up a little? When you're ready to get started." And not a second before. It probably wasn't manly to complain about the weather, but now that he had stopped running and climbing and leaping onto the backs of giant birds, he was cooling down, his sweat chilling his skin.

“You’re not shy, are you?” Sardelle opened a dark bottle of the bromine concoction that came with the kit and gave it a dubious sniff.

“In tropical climates, not at all. Even in temperate climates, I might wander about shirtless, but here… I haven’t quite acclimated to the icicles dangling from my nostrils in the mornings yet.” Ridge pushed back the parka, unfastened his uniform jacket, and went so far as to tug his shirt out of his trousers, but he wasn’t exposing any flesh until she was hovering over him with a swab of antiseptic in one hand and bandages in the other. Already, cold whispered up his back from having his shirt loosened.

“I suppose that means I needn’t worry about you wishing to engage in… convivial activities with me tonight then, activities that might require the shedding of clothing.” Sardelle shifted toward him, her rag now doused. “Shirt up, please.”

“No, you needn’t worry about that.” Ridge supposed her comment proved that his earlier thought was unlikely. She wasn’t there to seduce him for information. He probably shouldn’t feel disappointed by that. “Although, for the record, men don’t need to expose a whole lot of skin to get *convivial*.”

“I suppose that’s true. Shirt up,” she repeated.

Ridge reached for the hem, but hesitated, nibbling thoughtfully on the inside of his cheek.

“Problem?” Sardelle asked.

“Just wondering if I need to rub my dragon before enduring this.”

“Uhm, pardon?”

“You know, my little charm.” Ridge eyed her doused rag. “Or maybe *you* should rub my dragon.”

“Perhaps later,” she murmured.

He was probably safe so long as she didn’t dig needles and suture thread out. Ridge tugged up the shirt, grimacing where the blood had dried, and the wool stuck to his skin.

“These don’t look like they need stitches,” Sardelle said, “but you’ll have scars.”

Ridge thought to grunt that it wouldn’t be the first time, but he actually didn’t have that many war wounds. The only time he had crashed, it had been in the ocean, and he had come out unbloodied. “I’ll survive, so long as that owl is gone in the morning.”

“I hope it does prove nocturnal, or that it at least misses its master and feels compelled to go find him. Her. Whomever.”

“Me too.”

Sardelle’s left hand rested on his chest while she gently wiped his wounds with the rag in her right. Ridge could feel the warmth of her fingers against his skin, in contrast to the coolness of the damp cloth. He hadn’t been thinking of… convivial activities until she had

mentioned it, but now that she had—and that she was bent low and touching his chest—he had a hard time pushing his mind away from the topic. The wind was shrieking outside, with a half inch of snow already crusted on the ledge. It seemed the perfect time to cuddle with a woman. All right, cuddling wasn't *quite* what he had in mind. Anything more—and even that—would still be inappropriate. For all that she had helped them, helped *him*, he didn't truly know if she was friend or foe. Still, he noticed that she had been touching his chest for a while and had brushed over the same wounds more than once. Was it possible she was enjoying the ministrations? He had stopped feeling any sting. In fact, he was feeling that if she didn't stop soon, he would wrap his arm around her and pull her against his chest, kiss her—

"Where did you get the scar on your chin?" Sardelle leaned back, set the rag down, and screwed the cap back on the bottle.

Ridge had to clear his throat before he found his voice. "It's an old one—got it as a kid. I'm surprised it still shows."

She raised her brows.

"It was a gift from a street tough, one twice my size. He was always picking on me. I was terrified of him, but finally got tired of getting pushed around. I offered him a pie if he would teach me how to fight."

"A pie?" The corners of her lips lifted into a smile. Even her smiles seemed serene. He wondered if she ever lost that equanimity. Such as… in the throes of passion.

Ridge cleared his throat again. Down, boy. "I was about nine at the time. I didn't have any money or anything valuable, but Mom always baked to distract herself when Dad was out of town. At the time, there were three pies cooling in the window."

"And this bully agreed to your price?"

"He did. Lesson One was on how to take pain." Ridge touched the old scar, still vividly remembering that board with the nails on it hammering him in the face. "I think this tough enjoyed the lessons even more than he had enjoyed picking on me. I did get better at defending myself, even if I didn't learn how to bring down others until my army training. Even though I'd been accepted into the officer academy and flight school already, they make you go through the same first year of training that every grunt endures. Guess they want you to be able to fight your way home if you get shot down in enemy territory."

He realized he had wandered off topic. By now, Sardelle was holding the roll of bandage, probably waiting for him to stop yammering so she could continue her work. She merely smiled again and said, "You fight well, Colonel."

"Thanks." Ridge lifted a shoulder. He hadn't been hoping for

compliments. “You might as well call me Ridge. For good or ill, I’ve given up on thinking of you as a prisoner.”

A hint of wariness entered her eyes, and she lowered them to study the bandage roll. She picked at it, pulling out the end. He thought she might ask what he *did* think of her as, but her next question was, “Ridge… walker, isn’t it? I had wondered… ”

“Who gave me such a kooky name?” Ridge smirked. He got that a lot.

“Cocky was actually the descriptor that came to mind when I first heard it.”

His smirk widened. He got that a lot too. “Either way, I have my dad to thank for it. He was—still is—a world explorer and spent a lot of time in the Dresdark Mountains, mapping the jungles and looking for… oh, I don’t know. He told Mom he would come home with piles of gold someday. He never did. Didn’t seem to bother him. He was delighted to show off his new maps. He made a bit of money selling them to universities and *real* treasure hunters. Anyway, he doesn’t do it much anymore, but he always took his gear for climbing mountains. He’s been up some of the highest ones. He thought I would follow in his footsteps.”

Ridge knew he was telling her anything and everything about himself. He probably shouldn’t be, though he doubted anything bad could come of sharing his distant past. If she were asking about military secrets, he would be much more wary. He ought to ask *her* a few things about herself, but he suspected he would only get lies. Again. Strange how he could come to care about a woman in two days, especially one who he should probably be considering an enemy. Or maybe it wasn’t that strange. She had been trying to help all along. He smirked, remembering her charging up to make sure he didn’t use the cannons for fear of burying the fort. And she *had* been responsible for recovering him and his men from the real avalanche. Amazingly, nobody had died in that event. Some of the buried men *would* have died, would have run out of air, if they had been waiting for the digging soldiers to randomly chance across them. However she had done it, her assistance had saved the lives of men he was responsible for.

“Do you want to sit up so I can wrap this around you?” Sardelle lifted the bandages.

Bandages, right. He had almost forgotten.

Ridge pushed himself up, which brought them closer together. He noticed the sprinkling of freckles across her nose and cheeks. He especially found himself noticing her lips, which pursed with concentration as she leaned close to encircle him with the bandage. He held his shirt up for her, wondering if she was admiring the view

at all, or if this was simply one of thousands of chests she had seen as a healer. He liked to think his more nicely muscled and appealing than most, but he was doubtlessly biased. Whatever her background with chests, she seemed to be deep in thought as she wrapped his. She didn't notice when her black hair brushed his skin, creating the most delightful sensation. He wagered it would be soft to run his hands through. Too bad she was busy debating… who knew what? Maybe whether or not she should spill her secrets to him tonight. He wondered if *he* would have any luck seducing *her*. And wheedling out those secrets? Honestly, he would rather just have sex. Except he had promised her he wouldn't make any advances on her. Damn, what had he been thinking? And why was his mind running sprints from ear to ear? Searching for a justification to slip his hand behind her head and kiss her?

Sardelle tucked the bandage in and looked up, meeting his eyes for the first time. He struggled to smooth his face into something attentive, or at least not lustful. Though the way her face was tilted toward him, her hand lingering on his waist… was it possible she was thinking of more than first aid?

"Will I live, Doc?" Ridge asked.

"For the night at least. I can't make any promises as to the morning."

She had clearly meant it as a light comment, but it struck him to the core, instantly bringing an old quotation to mind. "The gods promise tomorrow to no man," he murmured.

"Barisky," she said.

Ridge chuckled. Of course she would know the author. Had it only been that morning she was summarizing the classics for him?

He didn't know how she would react, but he lifted a hand and brushed his knuckles against her hair. Despite enduring snow and killer owls, it was as soft as he had imagined. He leaned forward, watching her face for signs of rejection. Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn't pull away. Her lips parted, and that was all the invitation he needed.

. . . . .

Sardelle had been hoping for the kiss but not truly expecting it. That close, with nothing but a cocoon of rock and snow around them, she had sensed his emotions even when she had tried not to, and she had felt his response to her touch. She had also sensed that moment when he decided to act upon his response. His lips were warm, his taste even warmer. She leaned into him, happy to spend the night kissing, though it already saddened her to know how his feelings would change when he learned the truth.

A problem for tomorrow. Or maybe the snow would bury them, and this would be all they had. Might as well enjoy it…

She slipped her arms around his waist and under his shirt, enjoying the warmth of his skin, the hard ridges of muscle over his ribs. She had been identified as a gifted one young and had grown to adulthood within the Circle, wearing the robes of a sorceress. The only men who had ever dared approach her were other magic users, those who found her perfectly normal, not some strange being to be worshipped—or feared—and those men had rarely had the muscular frames of soldiers. Some of her sisters in the arts had donned costumes and gone out to find their lovers, but Sardelle had never had a taste for that, not for relationships that had no hope for a future.

So, what was different this time?

With his easy-going nature and quick smile, and the serious passion to his duty that lay beneath it all, Zirkander—*Ridge*—had made her care, made her want to protect him and… to be protected by him. To be a team. Also, he kissed like a god, and she melted into his arms, the heat from his lips flowing through her nerves like wildfire.

He leaned back, drawing her down with him. Their lips parted for a moment, and Sardelle whispered, “Colonel—Ridge—are you trying to get convivial with me?”

“When I said I wouldn’t?” His breath warmed her cheek; his dark eyes gleamed with humor. “Of course not. I just want to show my appreciation for your fine bandaging job.”

She was lying on those bandages now. She wouldn’t think it would be comfortable for him, but he was the one pulling her down… “I see. Very thoughtful.”

His warm hand slid beneath her parka, massaging her back. “Can we go back to kissing now?”

“Yes.” Sardelle wished she weren’t wearing the thick wool dress, that his hands were tracing bare skin. But their breaths fogged the air, and cold air whispered in through the entrance. Taking off clothing didn’t seem wise.

Perhaps Ridge sensed her problem, for he shifted onto his side, laid her on her back, and leaned in, protecting her from the draft. Her thick parka took the edge off the rocks, and, as his hands drifted across her body and his kisses deepened, she grew less and less aware of the cold. Everywhere he touched aroused heat, and by the time his hand found bare skin, she was breathing hard, charged with passion, cognizant of nothing but his lips, his tongue, his fingers, his hard body pressed against hers.

Sardelle had thought they might simply spend the evening kissing, whiling away the time while the storm raged, but she knew as soon as they started that she wanted more. His roaming hands and his deft

tongue made her want… everything. Very little air separated them now, and she was certain he wanted everything too.

She slid one hand from his back, down to his lean waist, enjoying the sensations as she stroked the rippling muscles of his abdomen, the dusting of hair tickling her fingers. She lowered her hand to his belt, but his lips pulled away from hers, and he whispered, "Don't."

A surge of disappointment filled her—had she read him wrong?

"Not yet," Ridge added and gave her a lazy smile. He kissed her again, leaving her breathless before his lips moved to her throat, then collarbone. She curled her fingers into his thick, short hair as he drifted lower, nipping and teasing her through the dress.

"Ridge," she whispered, having some notion of telling him there needed to be less clothing involved, winter be damned, but her thoughts tangled, and she couldn't get out more. All she knew was she didn't want him to stop.

His hand slid up her thigh, pushing the fabric of her dress up to her waist. Cold air nipped at her legs, but the contrast of the heat of his hand only made her shudder with pleasure. His mouth drifted lower, and his idea of showing his appreciation made her eyes roll back in her head. She was soon panting, digging her fists into the parka's fur lining, and calling his name. He refused to rush, though she urged him to when she could find the breath. That only made him grin up at her, his eyes crinkling, though the intensity infusing their depths never faded. He watched her as the stubble on his jaw rasped against her inner thigh, wanting to make sure she was enjoying his caresses. She wasn't sure why he cared, but knew he did, and she arched toward him, the knowledge and his touch filling her with waves of fiery euphoria.

When his lips returned to hers, they were hot and hungry, incensed with his own delayed need. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, wanting to please him as much as he had her. She ran her hand across his stomach, finding his belt again. He didn't stop her this time.

"Are you comfortable enough?" Ridge whispered between kisses.

She nodded. A thousand rocks could have been gouging her in the back, and she wouldn't have responded differently. He pulled her over anyway, putting his back to the rough ground. Part of her wanted to object—he had already suffered enough wounds for the day—but his hands found her hips, stroking her bare skin as he guided her onto him, and all conscious thought fled her mind. She gasped as he filled her, her hands finding his shoulders, fingers digging in, holding on as they rocked into each other. She wanted the moment to last forever, but passion built, sweeping through her, demanding release like an avalanche poised on a mountainside. The urgency of his kisses, the fire in his eyes, she knew he felt it too. They crashed together a final

time, and ecstasy burst from within, coursing through her veins.

Shuddering, Sardelle dropped against his chest. She buried her face in the inviting warmth of his neck, inhaling the masculine scent of him, sweat and gun smoke, and the forest.

He nuzzled the side of her face and murmured, “You’re amazing.”

Her? What had *she* done? He had been… everything. She wasn’t sure she was ready to confess that, so she chose the lighter option. “Does that mean your wounds didn’t bother you overmuch?”

“Didn’t even notice ’em.” His voice was muzzy. His hands still stroked her absently, but he seemed on the verge of sleep. “You must be a good doctor.”

Sardelle *had* infused that awful tincture with a little magic to ensure the gouges would heal well, so she accepted this praise more easily. “I’ll agree with that.”

Ridge chuckled softly. She laid her head on his shoulder. The lantern had gone out at some point, and she was glad, for tears pricked her eyes. The night had been… more than she expected. More than a way to while away the time. For both of them. Even if she hadn’t sensed his feelings, his touch had shown that he cared. Her tears were because… at some point, she either had to hurt him with the truth or walk away before he found out. Taking either action felt insurmountable.

Sardelle told herself to go to sleep, that she was ruining the moment by worrying. Best to enjoy this while she could. She kissed him one last time and snuggled into his drowsy embrace.

Chapter 8

The owl was gone in the morning. Ridge probably would have discovered this himself eventually, but he was still snuggled under the parkas with Sardelle when the shout came from outside. He sat up and shivered at the cold air that blasted him. His poor soldiers had doubtlessly had a less enjoyable night than he, so he wouldn't complain.

"Morning?" Sardelle murmured, her tousled locks flopped over her face.

"Yes." He pushed her hair back and kissed her.

She smiled and returned it, lifting a tender hand to stroke the side of his face. His heart danced at this simple gesture, trusting it meant that she was in no rush to rise, in no rush to forget their night together.

Reluctantly, he extricated himself. As much as he would have enjoyed spending more time with her, time he knew they wouldn't—*shouldn't*—have together once they returned to the fort, his duty compelled him to return as quickly as possible. The storm had passed, and a clear blue sky was brightening in the east. His men would be worried about him, just as he worried that the airship had swooped back in that direction after leaving that damned owl behind.

Ridge fastened his clothing, shivering. He didn't remember being cold last night, but maybe that was understandable. Body heat, indeed.

"I suppose no one will bring us coffee," Sardelle murmured, her clothing rustling as she, too, got ready.

"Not until we get back. Though I don't know if you'd like the stuff Lieutenant Kaosh makes. It's… sludgy."

"Then I won't feel jealous that I'll not likely be invited to breakfast."

She didn't sound stung, but the words made him wince nonetheless. Yes, as far as the rest of the fort knew, she was a prisoner, someone he definitely shouldn't be sleeping with, and even if she wasn't truly a prisoner, he probably still shouldn't be sleeping with her. Last night, he had been too busy launching campaigns from his trousers to

remember that fact. If she would just *tell* him who she was and what she wanted…

But no, if she could, she would have. He had sensed that a few times, when she had been gazing at him, *almost* saying something.

"We'll figure something out," he mumbled, though he couldn't imagine what.

Shifting rock outside of their cave let him escape from the moment without further promises.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Rav. We're fine."

Ridge was glad he and Sardelle were fully clothed—she even had her pack on already—when the soldier peered inside, though he had a feeling the fact that he had spent the night in a cave alone with her would be all around the fort within an hour of their return. At which point all sorts of speculation would occur. Oh, well. He had more important things to worry about than fort gossip. Besides, it wasn't until the news made its way back to his commanding officer that he truly had to worry.

"Owl's gone," Rav said.

"Yes, time to get back." Ridge grabbed his pack and rifle, but hesitated before trooping out. Rav had climbed down out of view, so he paused to give Sardelle a one-armed hug and murmur, "I'll find a way to get some coffee to you. Any other breakfast requests?"

She kissed him on the cheek—it couldn't feel that nice with a day's beard growth poking out of it, but she didn't seem to mind. "Those mango pastries sound good."

"I'm afraid I would have to take you back to civilization to find one of those. A basic pastry might be doable."

"I'll look forward to it."

Ridge squeezed her one more time, knowing it would be the last for a while, then climbed out of the hole. The soldiers were all waiting at the bottom, their packs and snowshoes on. Belatedly, it occurred to him to wonder if he had any lipstick smears across his face or bite marks on his neck. No, Sardelle hadn't been wearing any makeup—where would she get it in that pit of a fortress?—and she had been enthusiastic, but still on the refined side, and worried about putting weight on his wounds. As if he would have noticed. She probably wouldn't bite him until their *second* night in a cave.

That thought had Ridge grinning, but he managed to rein it in by the time he reached the bottom. The first question he got was whether they should try to dig Nakkithor's body out of the snow, and that sobered him right up. He and Sardelle helped retrieve the dead soldier and build a travois, then Ridge led the way out of the canyon. The snow had blurred their trail but not swallowed it whole, though he

could have found his way regardless. He might not have all the combat assets these infantrymen did, but he didn't get lost, not even when he was upside down, streaking away from an airship with cannonballs flying by on either side.

It doubtlessly marked him as crazy, but the memory of that battle filled him with nostalgia and a longing for home. He wondered if Sardelle would like his little cabin on the lake. Not that she would ever visit it… She would finish whatever she had come here for and then disappear, sneaking out past the guards as easily as she had the last time. And if she took something from the mines, it would be treason if he let her go without trying to stop her. At the least, it would be ineptitude. He had never thought his record was in danger of being stamped with either label. A first time for everything. Unless he locked her up until she talked. That would be a lovely reward for last night.

The fortress came into view more quickly than he expected, or maybe his thoughts had kept him busy and he hadn't noticed the trek. Men had been working to clear the east wall, so one couldn't simply run down the hill of snow and into the courtyard, but it would be some time before evidence of the avalanche was completely gone.

The gate opened before they arrived, and Ridge found Captain Heriton waiting in the courtyard, along with a couple of burly soldiers and a scruffy prisoner with shifty eyes.

"Uh oh," Sardelle murmured behind him.

Before Ridge could ask for clarification, the prisoner thrust his arm toward her. "She's the one."

Captain Heriton nodded slowly, as if he had known all along. Ridge met Sardelle's eyes and found concern there. Was her secret about to come out?

"What is this, Captain?" Ridge asked, his palms suddenly damp inside his mittens. If her secret turned her from an uncertainty to a known enemy, what would he do?

"This is the man you had us detain, the one who supposedly killed the woman in the washroom."

"He denies it?"

"No, he admits it since he claims she was a witch and had put a curse on him, on his loins specifically. He's had a rash ever since. He assumed she had done it because he'd tried to coerce her into a sexual relationship. She threatened him apparently." Heriton wriggled his fingers, as if these details were dismissible, but his eyes sharpened as he launched into the rest of his explanation. "In interviewing him, I discovered that your… friend—" the captain extended a hand toward Sardelle, "—was also a suspect, albeit one this prisoner couldn't reach to interrogate since she's so often been with you. But it seems she was

also present when this man developed his rash. He had just found her down in a mine shaft."

"Not a shaft," the shifty-eyed prisoner said. "She was *in* the rocks. It was odder than a three-legged parrot. We had to dig her out. Rescued her. She wasn't grateful like you'd expect though. Crazy woman ran past us while we were bent over."

"Because of… a rash?" Ridge asked.

The man nodded, crossed his legs, and dropped his hands protectively over his crotch. "Most painful itchy thing I've ever had."

Ridge gave Sardelle a curious look, but her face had gone expressionless. She didn't even offer a these-people-are-obviously-crazy eyebrow raise.

"It's odd enough that a woman would have made it down into the mines," Heriton said, "when the trams are operated by soldiers, and they're the only way in and out."

Possibly. Someone could slip down into the mines without using one of the cages. The diagonal shafts were steep, but not *that* steep. Sardelle was obviously gifted at sneaking in and out of places. Ridge reminded himself to question the gate guards later. For now, he remained silent and nodded for the captain to continue.

"It's even odder that she would be all the way down at the end of a new tunnel, in the rock itself, if this man can be believed."

"This self-confessed murderer?" Ridge couldn't keep from asking. How reliable a witness should they consider him?

"I got no reason to lie about this," the shifty man said. "I know what I seen."

"It's hardly the only unusual thing that's happened revolving around this woman," Heriton said. "I've been wondering if it's a coincidence that the Cofah showed up on the same day she did."

"They showed up on the same day *I* did as well," Ridge said.

"*You're* a national hero. She's… " Heriton groped in the air, as if he couldn't get a grasp on Sardelle. At least Ridge wasn't the only one. "I'll be blunt, sir," the captain went on. "It makes me uneasy having her walk around here at your side, like she's your trusted aide. I… I'd like to discuss this further with you in private."

"Yup, I figured you would." Ridge sighed. Inviting Sardelle up for coffee was going to be every bit as unlikely as he had feared. "I have a funeral service to arrange and five thousand other things to do, but I'll talk to you this afternoon."

"Very good, sir."

"Now, go find work. All of you." He shooed the captain and the rest of the soldiers away, until only Sardelle remained, her hands clasped behind her back as she gazed up at the mountains. Ridge would have paid a lot to know her thoughts. "You'd better go back to work and

stay out of trouble for a few days, at least until something else distracts Heriton." He smiled at her, though he felt guilty for sending her back to the laundry and those crowded barracks rather than finding her a nice room. His room, perhaps? The problem was, he shared all of the captain's concerns. Whatever she had been looking for down in the mines when she had been discovered, Ridge doubted very much that his superiors would want him to give it to her.

"Work?" Sardelle asked. "I thought I had the day off. Eight days off, wasn't it?"

The book reports. Right. He almost told her that the days off wouldn't start right away, but curiosity changed the lay of his tongue. "What would you do if those days off started today?"

"Research in the prison library. I… thought I'd try to find your flier for you."

"My what?"

"The flier you were talking about yesterday, the one that crashed ten years ago." Sardelle spread a hand. "Maybe you could drag it back here and fix it up so you would have a way to defend against further incursions from the airship."

He frowned. He had caught her hesitation and suspected she'd had something else in mind for research until this inspiration struck. Yet, this was exactly the right thing to say to win him over. If he could find that flier and fix it somehow… he wouldn't have to stalk uselessly back and forth on the ramparts when enemy airships flew circles around the fort.

"Three days," he grumbled. Ridge hadn't even known her for three days, and she already had intimate knowledge of the controls on his dashboard.

"Pardon?" Sardelle asked.

"Nothing. Go. Research." Ridge waved. "The library is on the second floor over there. I'm skeptical you'll find it particularly extensive or useful though. I doubt records of crashes are kept in there."

"I won't know until I look." Sardelle bowed her head toward him. "Thank you."

Such a formal parting of ways. It seemed a crime after their intimacies in the cave. Yet this was how it had to be. He shambled off in the other direction, heading for his office, his heart feeling like a crashed flier.

. . . . .

Colonel Zirkander hadn't been exaggerating about the library. Ridge, Sardelle reminded herself with a smile. He had invited her to use his first name. It wouldn't be appropriate in public, with half of his men

giving her hard, suspicious looks, but she would think about him that way. Nobody here had access to her thoughts, fortunately.

She ran a finger along the backs of the dusty tomes lining the library's single bookcase. She recognized many of the titles from his list. A few gaps on the shelves suggested that at least some of the prisoners had taken him up on his offer and were going to try to read the classics. Sardelle had been lucky so many of them were old enough that they had been classics even when she had gone to school. Albeit that book on flight hadn't been anything she had read. Jaxi had coached her through summarizing it.

You're welcome.

Sardelle smiled. *Do you have any idea where the crashed flying machine might be?*

No good morning first? You simply want to send me straight into researching for you?

I apologize. Good morning, Jaxi. I'd like to thank you for your discretion last night.

Discretion? You mean the fact that I kept my mental lips shut so you could make the rocks shake with your colonel?

Sardelle blushed, though it wasn't as if she had any secrets from her soul-linked sword of nearly twenty years.

Three hundred and twenty years. And don't I always stay out of your head when you're being intimate with someone?

Yes, though it's been so long that I thought you might have forgotten my preferences.

As I recall, scrawny sorcerers with ink smudges on their fingertips are your usual preferences. I must say the colonel was a welcome change.

Sardelle's heart quickened at the memory of how *much* of a change Ridge had been, how enticing it had been to run her hands over his lean, muscular body… *That's why I want to find his flying machine for him.*

She made herself focus on the task at hand, pulling a journal from the shelf, one hand-written by a general from two decades past. It was too old to have anything to do with the crash, but maybe it would contain information on common flight routes or something of that nature.

So he'll feel so grateful that he will send his minions digging in my direction?

Something like that.

Just don't forget your mission here. I doubt you're going to have much time left to act freely.

As long as Ridge is commanding, I don't think I'm likely to end up in shackles.

If swords could shrug, Jaxi did. *If I were you, I wouldn't presume too*

much. He's loyal to his military, and you're a problem as far as that military is concerned. Don't get cocky because he slept with you. It's not like there are many options here.

Thank you for your bluntness. When you're not busy sounding like a teenager, you sound like my grandmother.

Just so long as you know I know what's best.

You're just grumpy because you don't think I'm working to free you, but that was my original intent in coming to the library. Sardelle sat at the room's only table and opened the journal she had selected. *If I can figure out what they're looking for in these mines, and there's a way I can help them find it… I'm sure I could get a tunnel dug in your direction.*

You haven't figured that out yet? Jaxi sounded genuinely surprised.

No…

Laughter echoed in Sardelle's head. A lot of laughter. She imagined Jaxi wiping tears before asking her next question. *Why didn't you ask?*

Sardelle scratched her head. *I thought I had.*

Hm. I don't remember that. Anyway, the magical mystical energy sources these soldiers would die defending are… lamps.

Lamps?

Yeah, those illumination prisms that hung on the ceilings in rooms and tunnels throughout our complex.

Sardelle leaned back in the chair, picturing the glowing white light sources. *And they call those crystals?*

The rock does take on sort of a crystalline texture when it's melted and fused, then imbued with power.

Well, I was right to be befuddled that they were mining in the backside of the mountain then. That must be where they first chanced across them. I guess we had tunnels—and lamps illuminating them—back there, though there would be a lot more in the main living areas.

Yes, and I'm quite sure there are a couple in the room you left me in too.

Sardelle nodded slowly. *Yes, I can lead them right to you. Or close anyway. I'll have to sneak back down there and pull you out myself. If they find you first, and I take you, they'll call it theft and chase me halfway across the world.*

Nah, I can make sure they have no interest in me. Rashes are the least of the things I can do to any grubby miner who puts his hands on me.

Sardelle choked at the imagery that flashed through her mind, courtesy of Jaxi. *I think your three-hundred-year imprisonment has made you punchy.*

If by punchy you mean filled with bitterness, loneliness, and barely contained vitriol, you are correct. I'm aching to return to work. And I'm quite curious to see how the world has changed. A ride in an airship would be fabulous.

I'll see what I can arrange once we're the masters of our own fate again. Now, if I can just find that wreck, I'll have a reason to report to Ridge's office.

Get a map. I'll show you where it is. I don't know how serviceable that flier will be after ten years in the sun, wind, and snow, but if it'll make your man happy…

You already found it?

Yes, did you think our conversation was consuming all of my vast mental resources? I am a soulblade, you know. Powerful and gifted.

And cocky.

Naturally.

Sardelle was poking through a rack of maps, searching for a topographical one of the mountains, when the door creaked open. She looked up, hoping for Ridge, though she couldn't imagine what would have brought him by so soon. It had only been a half hour. He couldn't be missing her yet, though maybe he had been thinking of her and how delightful it would be to share that coffee with her…

Now who's cocky?

Hush.

It wasn't Ridge but a young soldier who entered, a soldier carrying a steaming mug of coffee and a couple of books under his arm. He was watching the black liquid carefully as he walked; it was filled to the brim and threatened to slosh over. Her first thought was that he had the morning off and had come to use the library as well. She started to push her book to one side so he would have room to join her if he wished, but he stopped at the head of the table and set the mug and the books down in front of her. He also dug a slightly smashed muffin out of his pocket and laid it next to the coffee.

"Ma'am, Colonel Zirkander sends these items with his well wishes for the success of your research."

"Oh, thank you. Thank him for me, please."

"Yes, ma'am."

He remembered, Sardelle thought as the soldier strode out, closing the door behind him. *I think I'm in love.*

I may gag. Do you have my map yet?

Just a moment. Let me see what he sent. Sardelle opened the first book. It was a journal like the other one, but more recent, written by a general's assistant from… yes, dates ranging from twelve to nine years ago. The crash should have happened during that time. The second book was an atlas.

There you go. Don't you love him now too?

He does *have a sexy chest.*

Sardelle snorted and flipped through the pages, finding the correct mountain.

That's the spot. Jaxi used her finger, guiding it across the contour lands. Sardelle always felt it a little strange when the soulblade took control, but, as an early instructor had pointed out, it was only fair given that humans got to swing swords around whenever they wished. Once Jaxi had even ambulated her unconscious body after a battle, moving Sardelle to a safe spot where she wouldn't be captured by the enemy.

An image flashed through her mind of a narrow, snow-covered plateau overlooking a ravine with a river and a lot of jagged rocks far below.

You're saying it will be difficult to retrieve, eh?

There's a reason the only thing the soldiers recovered after the crash was the power source.

Maybe Ridge can… disassemble it somehow. Or bring out a team and repair it up on that plateau. If I had a schematic, I'm sure I could help.

Better leave it to him, Jaxi thought. *I doubt he's going to believe you're an engineer* and *an archaeologist.*

Possibly right. Sardelle pushed back her chair.

Where are you going?

To tell him, of course.

You've only been in here for thirty-seven minutes, and you've only had his books for seven. Don't you think he might find that efficiency a little unlikely?

You may be right. Sardelle settled back in the chair and picked up the coffee mug. She took a sip. It wasn't as sludgy as Ridge had threatened. Maybe he had put someone else on coffee-making duty this morning. *An hour? That would be long enough, wouldn't it?*

You just want to see him again, don't you? I am definitely going to gag.

Careful. You wouldn't want to inhale a rock.

. . . . .

Ridge stifled a yawn as he followed Captain Bosmont, the engineer responsible for keeping the mine machinery in working order, to the bottom of yet another tram line. The officer hopped out of the cage and pointed at the pulley system at the bottom. "This is the last one, sir. Let me get the part number for you."

The captain rolled up his sleeves, dug a wrench and pliers out of the coveralls he wore over his uniform, and clanked and tugged at bolts the size of apples. The burly officer had shoulders and forearms that would have impressed a smith, along with tattoos that covered most of the skin Ridge could see, including one of the schematic of a dragon flier. That had been what had convinced Ridge to work past his office hours, following the man around and writing down his parts requests. A private could have handled the job, but on the off chance

Sardelle found the location of the downed flier, it wouldn't hurt to make friends with the fort engineer.

"Need a hand?" Ridge asked.

"Nah, I got it. You make yourself comfortable, sir. This'll just take a minute."

Ridge eyed the open chamber, with its six mineshafts shooting off at irregular intervals, and wondered where one might find comfort. Perhaps he could sit on one of the rusty ore carts lined up on the rail. He yawned again, not bothering to hide it this time. Though he and Sardelle must have been stuck in that cave for twelve hours, he didn't remember getting all that much sleep. How odd.

The captain glanced over, and Ridge wiped the smug expression off his face. "I appreciate you coming down here, sir. And ordering the parts. The general always said there wasn't any money in the budget, and he expected me to make do. Well, you can only make do for so long before things start busting, and when stuff breaks down here, people get hurt or killed."

"There wasn't money in the budget because he had no idea how many people were actually working here, so he had to overestimate on his supply orders. That's been fixed now, so we'll only be ordering what's needed and nothing extra."

Bosmont nodded and pulled out a torso-sized part that must have weighed a hundred pounds. His voice wasn't at all strained when he said, "Number's on the back, sir, if you want to write it down. 'Preciate it, thanks."

Ridge hurried to do so, so the captain could return the clunky piece before he threw his back out. After he refastened his bolts, they headed for a cage up to the top.

"You ever work on fliers?" Ridge waved toward the man's tattoo.

"My first duty station, sir. Love them babies. Got to fly a couple times, too, but nothing like what you do of course." Bosmont threw the lever to start them up the tramline.

"*Did*." Ridge sighed.

"Yeah… was wondering about that. Seems a waste, them sending you here when you could be blowing up enemy airships. How, ah, did that come to be, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I threatened to rip off the wrong diplomat's cock."

It was hard to tell in the dark cage, but Ridge thought the man looked at him in shocked silence. It was silent for a moment, anyway, with nothing except the clank and grind of the cage rolling up the rails. Then Bosmont laughed.

"Something similar happened to me, sir."

"With a diplomat?"

"Nah, with a commanding officer."

“Well, I trust now that we’ve bonded like this, I won’t have to worry about such threats from you.”

“No, sir. Glad to have you here.”

They stepped out of the cage up top, and Bosmont shook his hand before walking off, whistling a tune. Ridge wished all men were so easily pleased.

He turned, intending to make sure nothing important had been left on his desk before finding his rack, and almost tripped over someone in the dark.

“Sorry, Colonel,” came Sardelle’s voice from beneath the hood of a parka. Did she have it pulled up because of the cold, or because she was skulking about and didn’t want anyone to see her? Or maybe she wanted to secret him off to some dark corner for a repeat of the previous night’s activities? That would be scandalous, completely inappropriate and… appealing. “I’ve been trying to meet with you all day,” she said, “but your captain wouldn’t let me in the admin building to see you.”

“He wouldn’t?” Ridge squashed irritation at the captain. Heriton was just doing his job, however annoying certain aspects of that job were at the moment. “I apologize for that. What did you want to see me about?”

“I believe I’ve found the location of your flier, and I think I can help you find something else too.” She glanced toward a pair of miners heading out of a tram cage and toward the mess hall. “You might wish to discuss it in private. And I need some light to show you on the map.” She held up the atlas he had sent her.

“The furnace should still be warm in my office.”

“I’ll follow you. I’m fairly certain the captain won’t deny *you* entrance.”

“I should hope not.”

Heriton had left for the day, so nobody charged out to deny anything. Ridge was relieved. He knew he would get more concerned looks if the captain saw him taking Sardelle up to his office. Ridge had been too busy working and watching the skies for returning Cofar ships to worry about rumors and gossip during the day, but he didn’t doubt that word of his night spent alone in the cave with Sardelle would have gotten around and that Heriton would have heard. The captain had made it clear that while he respected Ridge very much, yes, sir, he suspected Sardelle was a witch who had put a hex on him, something to make him sympathetic to her cause. Whatever that was. Maybe he was about to find out. He doubted she had spent the whole day researching flier crashes.

Ridge stepped inside the office and turned up a couple of lamps. He thought about inviting her to sit with him on the couch—perhaps

doing *more* than sitting—but she went straight to business, laying the atlas out on his desk and opening it to a page she had dog-eared. She had circled and X-ed a spot on the southern side of the mountain. “It’s been exposed to the elements on the top of a cliff for ten years, so I don’t know if there’s hope for making it flight-worthy again, but you can check at least.”

“Yes, I’ll send out a team.” And hope there were no owls haunting that side of the mountain. “Thank you. And there was something else?”

“Yes.” Sardelle had pushed back the hood of her parka, and her black hair tumbled around the silvery fox fur rim, making for an eye-catching contrast. She looked around the office. “May I see the mine map again?”

Ridge pulled it out from behind the bookcase. While he spread it out, Sardelle grabbed a pen out of a drawer.

“You’re going to mark up the official copy?” he asked.

“With likely locations of crystals, if that’s all right?”

His breath caught. She couldn’t possibly know, could she? With the mine producing so few of them, getting them back from crashed fliers was always paramount, and every time one went missing meant a reprimand on someone’s record, even if the pilot had been facing overwhelming odds. Ridge had heard rumors that there weren’t any left in the king’s vaults. He couldn’t let that information out, though, not to Sardelle, not to anyone who might repeat it.

“So long as it’s not graffiti,” Ridge said, making his voice casual.

“I’ll try to restrain my doodling tendencies.”

Sardelle bent, one hand on the map and one holding the pen. Ridge held his breath. She marked an X, then another, and a few more. “These are approximate, of course, based on my studies of the Referatu. The maps I’ve seen were from before the mountain was bombed.”

Ridge, noticing his mouth was dangling open, snapped it shut. “Where and when did you study these people so closely?” And how could she know so much about the history of an area owned and operated by the government when he had known so little? Though he supposed the military had only been mining here for fifty years or so. Before that, perhaps someone else had been doing research? He had no idea, in truth. Maybe he needed to spend some time in the library. “I can’t imagine it was during your days as a pirate.”

“No.”

“I only mention this because Heriton found your record.” Ridge pulled the folder out of a drawer. “It actually confirms the story you were telling the other day, if you can imagine that.”

Sardelle didn’t appear surprised or uncertain in the least. She gave

him that serene smile and said, “I must be more honest than I sound.”

“I… think not.” Ridge suspected she had planted the record. If she could sneak in and out of the guarded fort and the guarded mines, the archives room wouldn’t present that much of a challenge.

She spread her hands. “There are a lot more crystals off the edge here. I can point more out to you if you have another map of the other half of the mountain, but maybe you want to see if you can verify these first.”

Ridge tossed the folder back into the drawer and studied all the Xs she had made. Eight. If he found crystals in half of those locations, he would probably get an award when he got back home.

“I would have told you sooner, if I had known what you were looking for,” Sardelle said. “It was only when I was digging around in the library that I came across the information.”

“And what are *you* looking for?” Ridge gazed into her eyes. “While I appreciate all this assistance, especially if something comes of it, I’m quite certain you didn’t come here for me.”

“What brought me here… was largely an accident.”

“But you’re searching for something. Nobody stays here without a purpose.”

“No,” she murmured, gazing at the dark night beyond the window.

Ridge thought about taking her hand, but clasped his hands behind his back instead. This was a professional discussion, not… anything else. Though maybe she could be teased into sharing more if he confessed the times he had considered finding creative ways to extract information from her. “I knew I should have tried my seduction plan.”

That pulled her attention back to him. She raised an elegant eyebrow and murmured, “Hm?”

“At one point, it crossed my mind that you might be here to seduce me. Then I decided you weren’t and thought perhaps I should attempt to seduce you, so I could learn your innermost secrets. But I was afraid I lacked the sexual allure and charisma for the task.”

Her lips curved upward. “The deceit required for the task, more likely.”

“So my allure is fine?” Ridge wiggled his eyebrows.

“It’s quite nice.”

“Good to know.” He tapped a finger on the freshly marked map. “I am going to keep trying to wheedle the information out of you until you relent. I hope that fact won’t damage my allure overmuch.”

“So long as you keep delivering me coffee in the mornings.”

“Any particular care over which of these Xs we mine toward first?”

Sardelle pointed at two in close proximity. Interesting. They were down deep and not particularly close to the shaft where she had supposedly been discovered wandering.

“If you tell me what you’re looking for… ” Ridge started, though he wasn’t quite sure where he was going with the offer.

“You’ll help me find it?” she asked, her tone dry. She must understand that the military considered all of this their property and anything found within the mountain theirs.

Ridge licked his lips. He had to be careful. To promise anything that hinted of treason… he couldn’t do that. But if she could truly help him find crystals, and what she wanted lacked in military significance, then what would it matter if he never mentioned it in his reports? He closed his eyes. The thought of withholding information from his superiors made him uncomfortable. But maybe he didn’t have to withhold it. The crystals were of paramount importance. He would be justified in trading something valuable for them.

“Though I fully acknowledge that what’s in that mountain isn’t mine to trade, I think I could… make it work for my reports if I received crystals in exchange for… something else. So long as it’s not some huge ancient weapon that will be used to destroy the continent.”

“This is my homeland too. I wouldn’t do anything to harm it.”

He believed her. And it sent a wave of relief through him. “Good.”

Sardelle studied the map, or maybe the floor at her feet, or maybe nothing. Ridge felt her debating with herself and didn’t say anything. He had already pushed enough. If she didn’t—couldn’t—trust him, he understood. He had suspected from the beginning that they were on conflicting sides.

Finally, she looked up, meeting his eyes. “It’s a sword.”

“A sword?”

“A six-hundred-year-old Referatu soulblade.”

Chapter 9

Sardelle had known it would get colder, but she wasn't ready for how much colder. Now she understood why her people had put their homes *inside* the mountain instead of on it. If they had been less feared, maybe they wouldn't have had to use such a remote part of the world, but relationships with mundanes had always seemed to work better with separation. Until that didn't work anymore either.

Sardelle sipped from a coffee mug—she had another mug in her hand, a cover over it in a vain attempt to keep it from chilling—and watched as Ridge and his engineer friend worked on the rusted flying machine now residing in the center of the courtyard, its dragon "feet" perched near the frozen stream. There wasn't a building large enough to house it, and there wasn't room to work on it anywhere else. Just getting it here had been a gargantuan chore, she understood. It had come in pieces, pulled around and across the mountain in stages by strange machines the engineer had said were usually used in the logging industry. Whatever route it had taken, it was here now, and the miners, soldiers, and even the women working the laundry room were taking bets as to whether it would ever fly again. Given the amount of snow that had fallen overnight—there were at least nine new inches blanketing its metallic carapace and wings—Sardelle wasn't even sure it would be able to remain standing upright through the day.

Like everyone else working up top, she checked the sky often. It had been nearly three weeks since the encounter with the airship and the owl. She wanted to believe the Cofah had forgotten about the fort and had gone home, but she suspected they were still out there. Ridge thought so, too, and there was an urgency about the way he worked on the flier, as if the small one-man craft could stave off an attack from an airship that claimed a sorcerer among its passengers. He said they had the cold and the snow to thank for the peaceful days, citing airships' sensitivity to changing weather conditions and thin air, but Sardelle wondered if the other sorcerer had sensed her somehow, and if they were acting more warily because of her presence. She would have preferred to be a surprise… someone to lie in wait if needed,

especially since she couldn't reveal to her allies that she had powers. She wasn't all that certain she was a match for this jungle shaman anyway. Maybe once she had Jaxi…

Ridge had ordered new tunnels opened in the directions she had indicated, and they had already found three crystals. It was the reason she was allowed to stand around, drinking coffee and watching the men work, even though she had run out of days off some time ago. It was also the reason Ridge had a bounce to his step, she assumed. Or maybe that was because he was working on a flier, however rusted and dilapidated. She knew it didn't have anything to do with bedroom exploits, since she hadn't been invited up to his room for any of those. Not that she had expected it here in the fort, where she was under scrutiny from Captain Heriton and several others—she hadn't had to use her mental faculties to catch whispered gossip going around about her. Ridge himself must be under scrutiny from associating with her too. No, she hadn't been expecting exploits, but she did… miss them. At the least, it would be enjoyable to try bedroom activities with an actual bed. The lumpy, rocky cave had made things a little awkward, though she had found the experience quite enjoyable. The memory could still cause her to smile into her coffee.

"Morning," Ridge said, ambling over in his full parka, fur cap, and mittens, all three smeared with grease. For a pilot, he definitely had a hands-on approach to flier repairs.

Sardelle tamped down the urge to wipe off a smear on his nose. Even though it was snowing again—or maybe it was still snowing, as she couldn't remember the last time it had stopped for more than five minutes—there were people in the courtyard, miners tramping off to work and soldiers in the middle of shift changes. "Good morning, Colonel." She handed him the second mug. "How is the progress?"

This had become a ritual, her showing up with coffee, asking after his progress, and him spending a few minutes chatting with her about it. Just because he wasn't sending her invitations for midnight trysts didn't mean he didn't care, or wouldn't *like* to send those invitations. In the meantime, he smiled and chatted amiably with her, and despite the frozen courtyard setting and the walls of cannons surrounding them, she had come to find a comfortable familiarity in the daily sharing of their morning coffee. She looked forward to it.

"With the flier, about the same. We're building an engine from scratch from scrap parts pillaged from around the fort. I swear Captain Bosmont was eyeing the cook's metal pans this morning in the mess." Ridge removed the cover on his coffee and took a big gulp. "The miners also found another crystal last night." He beamed at her, and Sardelle melted a little inside at his obvious pleasure. "That makes four. I won't need to worry so much about testing the flier now."

“Because… you’ll need to borrow one of the crystals for it?” It still floored her that these people were using three-hundred-year-old lamps to power their flying machines.

“Because this pile of wings and rust might fall out of the sky and plunge to the bottom of a canyon on its test run. It would be difficult for anyone to retrieve the crystal then.”

Sardelle blinked at him. She knew it was questionable whether they would actually be able to get the flier in the air, but had assumed they would know if it was feasible before risking their lives. “And its pilot as well?”

“Well, I’m not sure they would bother going down to scrape his pulverized bones off the rocks. But the crystal, that’s valuable.” Amazingly, he smirked as he described this scenario. He had to be joking…

“You’re a unique individual, Ridge Zirkander,” Sardelle murmured. She didn’t use his first name when anyone was close enough to hear, but believed the snow would insulate their voices from those crossing to the trams behind them.

“I’ve heard that a lot in my life, though usually with cursing rather than fond smiles. You must be unique yourself.”

Sardelle smiled into her cup again. “I think you’ve already figured that out.”

He grunted. “I still haven’t figured out much about you. No signs of swords down there yet. Do you think we’re close?”

Sardelle shook her head. Though she had relented and told Ridge what she sought, she hadn’t plotted a direct shaft to it on his map. So long as the miners, with their powerful explosives and constant shoring up and supporting of the tunnels they built, got close, she should be able to drill the rest of the way in.

“If the men do find it, will it look like… anything other than a sword?” Ridge hadn’t asked much about it when she had revealed it as the item she sought; if anything, he had surprised her with his lack of surprise, but she supposed it fit with this relic-hunting archaeologist persona he had constructed for her. “Will it… it won’t be a danger to them, will it? Burn them if they touch it or something like that?”

“Of course not.” Sardelle lost her smile. “The Referatu weren’t evil.”

“Uh huh, that’s not what the history books say.” Ridge frowned as well, giving her that concerned look he did every time she spoke of magic, like he was worried for her soul.

What was she going to do if he found out the truth about her? For that matter, what was she going to do when she got the sword? At that point, she could leave, unless she somehow wanted to try and dig out more artifacts. She wasn’t sure how she would do that, but it did

irk her a bit, imagining the descendants of those who had buried her people alive coming back later to paw through their belongings.

"What will you do when you find it?" Ridge asked.

Indeed, just the question on her mind. "Study it," she said, though she already knew Jaxi's every inner and outer contour intimately. Sardelle had a vague notion of traveling the world and trying to find more of her people, descendants of them anyway. Not *everyone* had been at that birthday celebration. Almost everyone had been—which was no doubt why their enemies had chosen that day to attack—but more people than her had to have survived. Had they fled the continent? Were they hiding in some distant corner of the world? Would they welcome her into whatever community they had managed to create? Or could she somehow live amongst the mundanes and be happy?

"Back at some university, I suppose," Ridge said, studying the liquid in his cup.

"Aside from one handsome and generous fort commander, I have not found many people to welcome me here."

"And he's not enough of a reason to stay?"

Sardelle swallowed. This was the first time he had suggested he wanted her to. "I… "

"It wouldn't be forever. Just a year. Eleven months and five days now. Not that I have a calendar I'm marking on my desk or anything." Ridge gave her that quirky smile of his, the one that made his eyes glint as if he were planning some mischief. "I have a much nicer place down near the coast. A little cabin in the woods, next to a lake with some great fishing. It's very private and peaceful. Did I mention private? Nothing except the raccoons and owls—normal-sized non-freaky owls—to pay attention to what's going on out there at night."

"I see, and if I were to stay here for a year—" or go off and check on the world and on her people and then come back for him in a year… "—would I be working in the laundry and sleeping in a tiny bunk surrounded by dozens of snoring women the whole time?"

"I'm quite certain you've only worked in the laundry one day so far," Ridge said dryly.

"True enough, but there's only been one night when I haven't slept in the snore chamber." Sardelle wriggled her brows at him.

"Yes, I've regretted that, but I've felt somewhat… inhibited with Captain Heriton next door. The man has actually had the gall to knock on my door before dawn a couple of times and glance behind me to see if anyone else is in the room. I'm going to have to make sure he's not slipping any reports onto the supply ship. I don't need a spy in my own camp. Assuming that supply ship ever comes." He looked to the cloudy sky. "They should have been here four days ago."

Sardelle didn't want to talk about supply ships. She wanted to find a way to circumvent his spies. Of course she couldn't tell him that she could insulate his walls and keep the nosy captain from hearing anything. "Perhaps a less closely monitored location?" she suggested.

Ridge pulled his gaze from the clouds. "Oh?"

"Would anyone think it odd if you visited the library in the evening for some quiet reading time?"

"Reading time, eh? You don't think the library will be packed with miners eager to check out the classics?"

Sardelle grinned. "Have you had anyone take you up on that yet?"

"Actually, yes. I listened to four book summaries just yesterday afternoon, delivered in between pickaxe blows on the sixth level, since their supervisors wouldn't let them leave to come up to see me."

"Good. Now as to the library hours… perhaps later, we would be less likely to run into earnest readers. There is, after all, only the one table. Which we might like to use." Sardelle wasn't used to propositioning men—those with the nerve to do so usually asked her—so she wasn't sure if she came off as smooth or awkward.

Ridge grinned and bumped his shoulder against hers. "Goodness woman, you're either as libidinous as I am, or you're willing to do anything to get out of sleeping in that barracks room."

"It *is* a less than restful environment."

Ridge winked and opened his mouth, doubtlessly to suggest the library table wouldn't be restful, either, but a shout of "Colonel Zirkander" came from the ramparts, and he turned away, the humor in his eyes disappearing.

More than one soldier was pointing toward the western sky.

At first, Sardelle couldn't see anything other than snow, but then she picked out a dark balloon hugging the heavy gray clouds as it flew over the peaks toward them. The markings were different than that of the Cofah aircraft, all grays and blacks instead of gold and wood tones, and it had an enclosed cabin rather than an open ship design where one could see people standing on the deck.

"That's our supply ship," Ridge said, fishing in his pocket for something.

"That's good."

Now Ridge would have an opportunity to send word back to his headquarters about the enemy ship. It shouldn't be long until reinforcements arrived.

"Except that it shouldn't be coming in on that route… and I think that's…" Ridge extended the spyglass he had dug out of his pocket and watched the sky.

Alerted by the tension in his voice, Sardelle reached out with her senses. The ship was still far away, but she immediately felt the

emotions of the people aboard because they were so intense. There wasn't much of a crew—two, no three—but they were all scared. Terrified.

"Smoke," Ridge said. "They've been struck." He raised his voice to yell at the soldiers on the ramparts. "Ready the weapons. We might have company." He gave Sardelle a quick, grim look, handed her his coffee mug, then ran for the stairs.

The clanks coming from the flier paused, and the big engineer stuck his head out. "Sir, you going to want me at the—"

"Keep working on the flier, Captain," Ridge answered as he raced up the stairs. "We may need it sooner than we thought."

Sardelle, remembering the image he had painted of a possible failed launch, grimaced. She returned her attention to the incoming airship. There weren't any other vessels in the sky, at least not that she could see or sense, but—no, wait. At the very edge of her reach, behind the mountain peak, there was a familiar presence. The Cofah airship. It didn't seem to be coming closer. Indeed, she had the sense that the captain was struggling with the wind and the snow, but it didn't matter. It had already damaged its target.

By now, a spyglass wasn't needed to see the smoke streaming out of the gray airship's engines. Sardelle wondered if she could do anything to fix the problem, or at least slow the craft's descent. It was streaking across the sky more quickly than she thought might be normal for an airship, dropping altitude at an alarming speed. Its balloon wobbled and the sides rippled—it had been damaged, too, she realized, and was losing gas. They must have originally intended to land it in the fort, but the steering didn't seem to be working; it was veering toward the right. If it continued on that path, it would go full circle and crash into the mountain it had just crested.

Sardelle found the problem. The smashed rudder was stuck in one position, not responding to the pilot's frantic pulls at the controls. A cannonball was wedged into the steering mechanism. Sardelle pried it out, dumping the iron weight into the snow far below. She turned the rudder in the opposite direction and imagined she could hear its pained squeal from two miles away. It wasn't going to be enough to correct the problem. The vessel would still crash. Maybe that was inevitable, but better to crash close to the fort rather than into a mountain cliff.

She attempted to maneuver the craft against the wind without making it appear unnatural. Dozens of soldiers atop the rampart were watching. Fighting the wind was as much of a challenge for her as it was for the ship, and heat pricked at her skin, making her feel as if she were running laps around the fort instead of standing still. When the craft crashed, she had done what she could. She had brought it

down on snow rather than letting it smash into a cliff. She didn't know if it would be enough.

"Watch that ship," Ridge called to someone before sprinting down the stairs. "Sergeant Komfry, grab some men. We're going to look for survivors."

At first, Sardelle thought his command was meant for the supply ship and couldn't imagine why it would need to be watched—it certainly wasn't going anywhere now—but the Cofah vessel had sailed into view above that mountain peak. It hovered there, watching. Preparing an attack? More snow had gathered on the high mountainsides. Would they try the avalanche maneuver again? If so, she was ready. This time, she would stop them before they dropped any explosives. One way or another.

No sooner had she experienced the thought when a whisper sounded in her mind. *Who are you?*

The warmth of Sardelle's body vanished, replaced by a chill. The words came from the Cofah ship. From the other sorcerer. There was no doubt.

Come any closer and you'll find out, she responded.

The laughter in her mind rang dark and disquieting. *You could do nothing against my pet. You'll be even less trouble for me.*

Sardelle didn't point out that she had been limited as to what she could do because she couldn't let the soldiers *know* she was doing something. For one thing, she still had that problem. For another, it would be better for this foe to believe her weaker than she was.

She sensed the man—and she could tell it was a man now, someone older and experienced—trying to dig deeper and read her mind. She bricked off her thoughts. She could have prevented him from contacting her further as well, at least at that moment, but she didn't. Any intelligence she might gather from him could prove useful. And… maybe there was a part of her that wanted to hear from another telepath, another sorcerer. Even if he was the enemy and from an unfamiliar country and mage line. By default, she had more in common with him than with anyone here in the fort she was so determined to defend.

Why are you protecting these people?

Sardelle licked her lips, wondering if he had somehow slipped past her barriers to read her thoughts after all. No, it was a coincidence. Nothing more. She would have sensed him rummaging inside her mind. Besides, logic dictated that if he had to ask, he didn't know.

They are my people. Sardelle made sure not to think of Ridge as she sent the words across the wind. As the commander here, he would already be a target. No need to make him more of one.

Impossible. All of the Iskandian sorcerers were killed long ago.

Sardelle was glad nobody was watching her, or paying attention to her at all—Ridge had led a team through the gates on snowshoes, and everyone else was keeping the miners in the shafts or watching from the walls—for pain must have flashed across her face. She had been certain there would be *some* survivors. She was tempted to reach out to Jaxi, to ask how the soulblade read the situation, but not while this other sorcerer was monitoring. The last thing she wanted to do was make some enemy aware of the artifacts buried within the mountain.

Even if some ancestors of yours survived, the enemy sorcerer went on, *I don't understand why you would defend these people. They were the ones responsible for the purge. You* must *know that.*

You cannot blame a man for the faults of his ancestors.

Please. Do you think these people would be any different? They shoot, drown, and burn anyone with a hint of dragon blood. Nothing has changed. I'm surprised they haven't… ah, they don't know, do they? They don't know who you are.

Sardelle didn't respond to the smugness in the voice. How proud he was to have figured it out. Twit.

I will not share your secret. He chuckled. *Though I will be shocked if you succeed in keeping it. To always hide your true nature… it must be painful.*

What do you care?

Now? Nothing. But I… could care. You could leave these people. Come with me.

To what end?

I'll take you to where the others of our kind live. You would be more comfortable there.

Sardelle swallowed hard at an ache in her throat. She *did* want to find out where other sorcerers might be, but… if they were the types to join in with conquering armies, did she want anything to do with that? Of course, just because one man had made that choice did not mean they all did.

Or… The sorcerer's words grew softer, almost husky in her mind. *You could come with me.*

What are you offering?

A union. There are few left with dragon's blood, even fewer whose lines haven't been diluted to near worthlessness through the centuries. Those who remain rarely produce offspring when they breed with each other. The blood is too close, too intertwined.

Sardelle found herself gaping at the distant ship, which was still hovering over the snowy peak. Had she just received an offer to *breed*? And from an utter stranger? How romantic.

He would probably say anything to get her away from the fort. Maybe he considered her more of a problem than he had let on.

For a brief, immature moment, she thought of sending him an image of herself entwined with Ridge, but that would be idiotic. All she said was, *I'll keep your offer in mind.*

Do so. It will be a shame to kill you when we attack.

Uh huh. *And when will that be?*

Soon. Make your decision soon.

The enemy ship turned and drifted out of view, heading back to whatever docking space it had carved out in these inhospitable mountains.

Sardelle climbed the stairs to see if the crash site was in view and if Ridge had found any survivors. What she witnessed made her suspect he wouldn't be meeting her in the library that night.

. . . . .

It took Ridge and two other men to pull open the dented metal door of the gondola. The shouts they had heard when they first approached had stopped. He hoped that wasn't a sign of injured people falling unconscious—or worse. Unfortunately, he and the six-man team he'd brought out had needed to dig away a lot of snow to reach the door. The windows at the front of the enclosed cabin were still buried, so nobody could see in. The frame inside the balloon had been smashed as well, the gas bag ripped and torn, with shreds smothering the rest of the craft. In short, the crash site was a mess.

He was relieved when a cranky, "It's about time," snapped out of the darkness as soon as the door opened. His relief faded somewhat when the follow-up was, "Get us out of here, you buffoons."

Ridge was about to state his name and rank, in the event that might result in friendly relations, but the speaker added, "I'm not sure the pilot is going to make it," in a softer tone.

"Oster, Rav." Ridge waved for them to follow, then crawled inside first. The only light came from the doorway, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. "I'm Colonel Zirkander. Who's barking at me and where's the injured man?"

"He's up front," came a woman's voice—and Ridge gaped into the darkness in surprise. Who would bring a woman up here unless she was one of the prisoners? Or maybe this supply ship had been carrying prisoners as well as goods? "He was trying to keep us from landing hard. He wouldn't pull away from the controls, even when—" Her voice tightened in something close to a sob. She sounded young.

"As to who's barking, Colonel, you're speaking with General Melium Nax. You can call me sir."

Great. Ridge had heard the man's name spoken before. Usually in a fearful tone.

"Yes, sir." He could make out the general's form now—he seemed

to be comforting the other passenger, the woman—though Ridge was focused on crawling into the smashed cockpit. “Rav, is that you behind me? Do you see the pilot? We’re going to have to pry that busted panel off his legs to pull him out.”

“Yes, sir.” The burly infantryman brushed past him. “Hurrying.”

Ridge patted about, trying to locate the pilot’s throat to take his pulse. He encountered a lot of blood. Hells. The man had some ripped metal beam thrusting into his chest. And no pulse.

“Never mind, Rav,” Ridge said softly. “There’s no hurry.”

Behind him, the general sighed. The woman sniffed and wiped her face.

“Let’s get you two out of here,” Ridge said. “I’m sure you’ve sustained injuries as well. I’ll show you to the medic.”

“You’ll show me everything, young man. I’m here to check up on you.”

“Yes… I gathered that. I’m honestly more concerned about the Cofah right now. Rav, have the rest of the men unload this ship. We need the supplies, whatever survived the crash. And cut this poor pilot out as well, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ridge climbed out ahead of the others, offering the general a hand. The white-haired, stern-faced man looked like the no-nonsense sort—also known as the utterly humorless sort—and Ridge doubted that they would get along. Oh, well. He had to admit he wouldn’t mind handing over fort operations to someone else, at least while the Cofah threat remained, so he could focus on defense and getting that flier off the ground. The general had a few scars on his hands and face. He must have seen some battles, so he should have useful advice. So long as his scars hadn’t come from street toughs he hadn’t been able to bribe with pies.

The thought brought Sardelle to mind. Seven gods, how was he going to explain *her* to a new commanding officer? Captain Heriton wouldn’t have to send a secret report anywhere to find someone to inform.

“Careful, Vespa,” the general said to the woman, who was climbing out now.

Without thinking about it, Ridge offered her a hand. The general scowled—if he was the husband, he was at least thirty years older than the woman, maybe forty—but she beamed as she accepted the offering. She was attractive with a delicate nose and pointed chin, and lush blonde hair mostly tamed by a braid, though several wisps had come free in the crash. She didn’t appear injured, though when she stepped into the snow, she floundered and ended up leaning against Ridge, grabbing his parka to stay upright.

"Oh, it's deep here."

It wasn't that deep, but Ridge said, "Yes, ma'am."

"Vespa Nax is my daughter, Colonel." The general scowled at Ridge, as if *he* were the one who had grabbed *her*.

"Yes, sir." Ridge extricated himself from the embrace. "Why, ah, I wouldn't have expected you—or anyone—to bring a woman here." Ridge wasn't usually so circumspect with his superior officers, but he had never met Nax before and didn't feel as comfortable mouthing off to him as with those in his chain of command. Maybe because he had something to lose here. Back home… he knew they weren't going to take him out of the air for long. Here? He was going to have to tread lightly if he didn't want Sardelle locked up.

The general scowled—it seemed to be his normative state. "Vespa, Professor Vespa Nax, I should have said, is a geologist. The king suggested I bring her along to study the rock formations in the mountain and determine where more crystals might be found. We lost two fliers in ocean fights not two weeks ago. That's two crystals lost. Production must be increased."

Ridge had been about to lead the way back to the fort, but he froze. "Which squadron?" Not his people… He didn't want to hear about *any* downed pilots, but especially not those who flew under him.

"Which squadron, *sir*."

Was the bastard kidding? Even being circumspect, Ridge was going to have trouble with the general, he could tell already.

Nax pointed a finger at his nose. "I know your reputation, Zirkander. I've seen you strutting around HQ like everyone there should bow down to your brilliance, but you're an insubordinate nobody. Your family is full of drunks and delinquents. How you got into the academy, I can't even imagine. Must have been some female recruiting officer falling for a handsome face."

At that statement, Ridge was all too aware of the man's daughter looking on, her expression somewhere between surprise and exasperation. Ridge didn't mind getting his butt scrubbed with the porcupine brush, but he always hated those officers who did it in front of others. Vespa didn't matter that much, but the men unloading the dirigible—men working very hard to pretend they weren't hearing this—were soldiers Ridge might have to lead into battle later. They needed to respect him, not think he was some joke around HQ.

"I don't know how you got promoted this far," Nax went on, "but if you give me any shit, I'm going to knock your ass back to lieutenant."

"Wonderful," Ridge said. "Now, if you're done with that speech, which I get the feeling you were rehearsing all the way here, I'd appreciate it if you told me which squadron—which men—went down. Sir." And so his plans to be circumspect lasted all of three

minutes. As they said in the academy, no battle plan survived past first contact.

"Hells if I know," the general growled. "All you dragon kissers are alike. Now, if you'll show me to my office, I'd like to know what's been going on here since you took command." He scoffed and walked away—the black stone walls of the fort were visible through the snow, so he couldn't get lost. Ridge didn't hurry after him.

"I didn't realize my father had met you before," Professor Vespa said.

"He hasn't. At least not so far as I know."

"Oh, odd. Usually he reserves that level of vitriol for lobbyists, liberals, and his most loathed enemies."

"He must know I don't vote conservative at the holiday costume contests."

Vespa chuckled. Ridge hadn't been trying to be funny. Oh, well. "This way, ma'am. I'll show you to the, uh, guest quarters." Those being some dusty, unused rooms in the officers' billets.

"Thank you. And, Colonel? Can I call you Ridge?"

"Yes," he said though he didn't want to. He didn't want to breed any sort of familiarity with the general's daughter. Grumpy old Nax was going to be trouble enough without that. What had the king been thinking sending her out here among the hordes of horny men? An image of him in the cave with Sardelle flashed into his mind, and he flushed. Horny men indeed.

"Good. Ridge, then. It was Wolf Squadron. It was in the newspapers."

"Wolf." All of his indignation from the general's treatment drained out of Ridge. That was his team. What did self-righteous superior officers matter if his people were back there dying? "Do you remember the names?"

"It was a man and a woman. Dash and… Ann? Orhn?"

Ridge stopped in the middle of the trail, his boots suddenly feeling like lead weights on his feet. He closed his eyes. "Ahn."

"They flew with you?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry." The professor put a hand on his shoulder. "If you want to talk about it or to share a drink tonight, I would be happy to do so."

The woman's familiarity surprised him. Up ahead, the general had stopped and was scowling back. Ridge resisted the urge to push her hand away. He forced himself to say, "Thank you," and started walking again, knowing the hand would fall away on its own.

The snow had lightened, and numerous men were watching from the ramparts. He hoped they were paying as much attention to the sky

as they were to him and the newcomers—the Cofah ship had disappeared, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be back. He spotted Sardelle up there, the breeze tugging at her long black hair, and hoped she hadn't seen the overly familiar professor putting her hands on him. Something about the way she turned away as soon as he looked in her direction made him suspect she had.

Chapter 10

The snores reverberated from the ceiling, walls, and floors of the women's barracks. Whoever had designed the building should have considered carpets, curtains, tapestries, or at least something with sound-dampening properties. The decorator probably hadn't known many women who were so nasally challenged. Sardelle hadn't until she arrived here. Thus she lay awake in the darkness, listening to the audible slumber of tired women. She was tired herself, since she had spent the day in the laundry room. Though the other women had treated her like a leper since she hadn't been in there in so long and had been, as they called it, kissing balls and freeloading, it had seemed a good place to hide from this General Nax, who had been dragging Ridge all over the fort, making angry gestures and yelling.

Sardelle had instantly disliked the man, even though she hadn't been in the same room with him yet. Captain Heriton had shown up at some point, trailing along on what appeared to be an inspection. She had stayed out of his sight, not wanting him to be reminded of her. She found it highly unlikely this general would be someone who would make a deal with her when her sword was discovered.

She hadn't figured out who that woman was yet either, except that she was young and pretty and seemed just as out of place here as Sardelle. She was obviously Someone Special though, for the soldiers had all been bowing and smiling at her whenever she came around. She didn't think all of that could be the result of good looks.

After lying awake for an hour, Sardelle crawled out of bed and put on her boots and clothing warm enough for a trek across the courtyard. She didn't expect Ridge to be in the library, or even thinking about her, but she couldn't sleep anyway, so on the off chance he was there…

He's there.

Sardelle, in the process of sticking her feet into her boots, nearly tipped over. Jaxi had been silent all day, probably sharing her concern about being discovered by that sorcerer.

Yes, I'll lie low whenever their ship is around. I didn't like that smarmy know-it-all. Jaxi sniffed.

By lying low, you mean listening in on our telepathic conversation? Sardelle dressed more quickly, affected far more by the first thing Jaxi had said than by anything else.

I have to keep abreast of what's happening. I assure you, he didn't sense me.

That's good. Sardelle tugged on her parka. *When you said 'he's there,' did you mean—*

I'd hate to be wielded by some smarmy mage stinking of the jungle and joining in with conquerors.

I'm glad you also didn't like him, but what I really want to know is—

Yes, yes, your boyfriend is waiting for you. Though I'm not sure sex is what he has in mind.

Sardelle strode outside, still buttoning her parka. The snow had stopped and the sky had cleared, though the air was cold enough to freeze the hair out of her nostrils.

An attractive image. I recommend you don't share it with your lover.

Thank you for the advice, Jaxi.

There were fires in the watchtowers and braziers burning on the ramparts. Though it was late, the soldiers strode about, their eyes toward the sky. Yes, with the clearing weather, the Cofah might think it time to try a new attack. She swept the skies with her senses, though she didn't slow down from her brisk walk toward the library building. She didn't feel anyone out there. Good.

The library was only one room, upstairs in a building dedicated to equipment storage and welding. For a moment, Sardelle worried the front door would be locked, but it wasn't. There weren't any lamps lit in the open bay downstairs, and she had to use her senses to pick her way past everything from ore carts being repaired to giant flywheels from the machines that operated the tram. There was usually a clearer path to the second-floor stairs, but maybe things had been moved about for the general's inspection.

As she climbed to the upper hall and still didn't find any lamps lit, she began to doubt Jaxi's promise. But she sensed someone in the library room. Maybe Ridge had brought his own lantern and not bothered lighting any on the way. Perhaps a good idea if they didn't want to be discovered. Although with this general here now, Sardelle was reluctant to do anything with him that might get him in trouble. For all anyone here knew, she was a prisoner. Ridge was the only one who had thought of her as anything else.

She paused with her hand on the doorknob. Maybe she shouldn't risk contacting him. But she couldn't stomach the idea of leaving him in there alone. He was…

Drunk, she guessed as soon as she opened the door and smelled the alcohol. And sitting in the dark, staring toward the library's lone

window, which had a lovely view of the drab stone ramparts.

"Ridge?" Sardelle whispered. "Are you… do you want to be alone?"

He took a deep, audible breath, letting it out slowly before answering. Considering his answer, perhaps. Whatever had brought him here, Sardelle doubted it was she or an urge for sex.

"No," he finally decided.

"Can I… light a candle?"

"Yeah." His voice wasn't slurred, but he definitely sounded off. No, he sounded *down*. Defeated.

"Well, I don't like this new general already if he drove you to drink," Sardelle said lightly.

Ridge grunted.

"Is he… in command now?"

"Yeah. HQ gave him the authority to take over if I wasn't doing an adequate job." He flipped his hand, as if he didn't care.

After fumbling in a couple of drawers, Sardelle cheated, using her senses to locate candles and a box of matches. She brought them over to the table where Ridge was seated. He looked away when the match flared to life. The brown glass bottle next to him didn't have a label; maybe it had been concocted in some tub in the back of the barracks. Whatever it was smelled strong. A little wooden dragon figurine rested next to the bottle, the paint on its bulbous belly worn off. She had only had glimpses of the charm, but she recognized it. There was a little metal eyehook on the top with a braided golden loop attached. He must hang it in the cockpit when he flies.

Sardelle sat in the chair next to him. "Perhaps you could give me some context. I'm not certain whether I should be trying to cheer you up or commiserating with you. Or simply sitting in silence."

Ridge used the back of his hand to push the bottle toward her.

"Or joining you for a drink," she added.

"Two of my pilots were killed."

"Oh." It wasn't the general that had distressed him so, or not only the general. "Men you flew with? That you knew well?"

"A man and a woman. A girl, really. Ahn was only twenty-three, barely out of the academy, but she had a real feel for the flier and the archer god's gift for accuracy. She—" Ridge swallowed audibly, then cleared his throat and picked up the bottle. He took a long swig.

Sardelle wondered if this Ahn had been more than a fellow pilot for him, but kept herself from asking. This was not the time, and she refused to feel petty jealousy toward a dead woman.

Ridge set down the bottle. "She was a good kid. Would have had a great career. Made a difference, you know?"

Sardelle didn't have any words, none that wouldn't sound pointless and inane, so she simply laid a hand on his forearm.

"Dash, too," Ridge said. "Even if he was reckless. They both were. Probably got that from me. And then I wasn't there when—" He broke off again, gazing into the dark nothingness.

"I'm sorry," Sardelle whispered. It seemed so inadequate. For him, and for her too. Her thoughts drifted to those she had lost, friends and relatives who also would have had great careers if the fates had allowed it. Some had been younger than Ridge's lieutenant when the mountain had come crashing down.

They sat there in silence, letting the candles burn lower, their lights dancing with shadows on the bookcase. After a time, Ridge pushed the bottle toward her again.

"You should drink. I'm more interesting when you do. Better company."

Because he wished it, Sardelle took a sample of the strong-smelling brew. As she had suspected, it burned like fire going down her throat. She managed not to cough and sputter—barely. "As I told you this morning, you don't have to do much to be better company than a brigade of snoring women."

"Yeah? Guess I'm lucky standards here are low."

Sardelle too. She thought of the pretty blonde girl and the way she had fallen over Ridge from the moment she stepped out of the plane. It occurred to her that the hero worship she had seen from many of the soldiers must extend to women when he was back home. He must have his choice of female companions. If she were to knock on the door of his cabin by the lake someday, would she find him alone? Or, with so many other interested parties around, would he forget about her?

You never used to be insecure.

I never used to date much.

You're an attractive woman, Sardelle. He's in the library with you, not drinking with that blonde girl. She offered.

I'm sorry, were you trying to make me feel better?

No, just making observations.

Time for a different topic. "It sounded like that general was giving you a hard time. Will you get in trouble over… the changes you've implemented?" Or over me, she added silently.

"Already did. He thinks I'm running the place like the officer's club back home. He figures I'll bring in masseurs to rub down the prisoners next."

"Wasn't he at least pleased by the crystals you've found?" Sardelle asked.

"He was so happy he almost didn't scowl for a second. Wouldn't credit me for them though—not that I've had anything to do with finding them—" Ridge nodded toward her. "Even though Heriton told

him differently, he's convinced they came out of the ground on General Bockenhaimer's shift."

"Well… your men are close to another one. He'll be able to see that one for himself when they dig it out."

"Yeah."

"If I were down there, I might be able to find even more. Pretty soon, you're going to get into some of the old rooms, and there'll be a higher density of… " Sardelle stopped because Ridge had twisted in his seat to face her.

He clasped the top of the hand she had been resting on his arm. "Listen, Sardelle. You need to make yourself scarce. Don't let him see you, and don't show up when Heriton is around either. If he starts blabbing about what that prisoner said or about any of the admittedly unusual things that have happened since you came around… you'll be in danger. I won't be able to protect you. As much as I'd like to, I can't throw a superior officer off a cliff."

"I'd never ask you to."

"I know you wouldn't." Ridge lifted his hand and stroked the side of her face. "You're more mature than I am." His eyes moved, following her face as his fingers traced her cheek down to her jaw. A pleased shiver ran through her. "Sexier too," he murmured.

"I would refute that statement. You're quite sexy. Especially when you smile."

He managed a small one. "No argument on mature, eh?"

"No."

Ridge chuckled softly and leaned closer. He kissed her gently on the lips, then lowered his face to the side of her neck. Sardelle wasn't sure if he had commiseration in mind or… something more, but her body was certainly responding to his touch. It would be a shame to go back to the barracks now. He pushed his hand through her hair and massaged the back of her neck.

"I suppose being pawed over by a drunk wouldn't be much of a reward for you coming all the way out here to keep me company," he murmured against her throat, his lips grazing her skin.

She wondered if he could feel the rapidness of her heartbeat there. "Depends on the drunk," she whispered, slipping her hand behind his head and wondering why their chairs were so far apart.

"Oh?"

"You still seem to have… " That massage felt so good, her brain slipped a cog and she momentarily forgot the rest of her sentence. Good and… stimulating. Not to mention what his lips were doing on her throat. "Retained your faculties," she breathed.

"I was hoping you'd come." His other hand found her thigh. Even through her clothing, it charged her with heat.

Sardelle left her chair to sit in his lap and wrapped her arms more firmly around him. “Me too.” That didn’t make sense, but she didn’t care.

“You’re the only thing keeping me sane tonight,” Ridge whispered, and it was the last thing either of them said for a time.

. . . . .

After spending the night with Sardelle, something Ridge resolved to do more often, whatever he had to do to manage it, he found himself struggling to pay attention to the lecture from the general’s daughter. Oh, Professor Vespa surely didn’t mean it to be a lecture, but by the time she had explained the significance of the tenth type of rock from her sample case, Ridge was hoping General Nax would show up to send her away. Odd, when Sardelle had recited summaries of all those books, he hadn’t found it pompous or boring, but Vespa had an air of self-importance that made him want to pull out something else to work on while she spoke. He also got the impression she thought he wasn’t that bright.

“It’s important that we start getting the miners to categorize the non-valuable debris they clear out in each level,” Vespa stated. “I’m here to determine the most likely types of rock that we can find crystals in.”

“Someone has already determined that,” Ridge said. “That’s why we’ve found four in the last couple of weeks.”

“Someone.” Vespa crinkled her tiny nose. “A geologist? An expert?”

“I’m not sure what field she studied. She’s a prisoner.”

“You’re taking excavating advice from a prisoner? Oh, Ridge.”

“She’s educated.” Ridge probably shouldn’t be talking about Sardelle at all, but he didn’t want to have to institute some idiotic rock cataloguing system—he could just imagine how well that would go over with the miners, having to separate and label every chunk of dirt they removed—when they had a better way.

“From where?”

“She didn’t say.” It occurred to Ridge that he might have an unexpected resource to unearth a little more about Sardelle’s mysterious past. “Although, maybe you’ve heard of her. I think she was an archaeologist or in a similar field before… ending up here.” Did geologists and archaeologists work together from time to time, read each other’s papers?

“What’s her name?”

“Sardelle Sordenta.”

Vespa shook her head. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“Hm. She has some interesting ideas about where the crystals come from. Have you ever heard about there being a Referatu outpost here

at some point in the past? Here, inside the mountain itself?"

Vespa took a step back. "The sorcerers? Of course not."

She was genuinely surprised. Huh. Ridge had thought he simply didn't spend enough time in the halls of academia to have stumbled across the information himself. Well, a geologist wasn't an archaeologist. "You might find it interesting to actually go down into the tunnels," he said. "See the mine shafts. You can tell that some areas appear to have been mined before, and then collapsed."

"Truly? That's fascinating." She smiled, flashing a pair of dimples at him. "And did I just hear you offer to take me on a tour down there?"

"Er. I'm actually already late to meet Captain Bosmont to work on the flier."

Vespa held up a hand. "I wouldn't go near that thing if I were you. My father was furious when he saw that rusted junk pile—his words, not mine—in the middle of the courtyard."

"Yes, I was there to receive his opinions on the project yesterday." His opinions on *everything*.

"I heard him say he wants it scrapped."

"He'll think differently if we're able to use it to defend against the Cofah, who could be back at any time." Another reason Ridge didn't want to dither around giving tours. The skies were clear. The snow and wind that had been keeping the airship away wouldn't be a hurdle now.

"I'm sure he will. I would love to see you fly."

Ridge would love for *Sardelle* to see him fly. Her background might still be a mystery to him, but he had gotten the impression that she had never seen a dragon flier before, despite her academic familiarity with the Denhoft book.

A door banged open out in the hallway. "Colonel? General?" came Captain Heriton's excited voice. "News from the mines!"

Ridge pushed to his feet. "Shall we see what it is?" He held the door open for Vespa.

"Thank you, Ridge."

She walked out first and as Ridge stepped out, General Nax strode out of the office next door. Not surprisingly, he scowled at the back of Vespa's head, then at Ridge, having caught them both coming out of the same room.

"Hurry," the captain called from the base of the stairs. "Out by Tram Three. This is unbelievable."

"A crystal?" Vespa asked.

"Must be," the general said.

Ridge wasn't so sure. Heriton had been as excited as anybody at the finding of the first crystal—the first one in over a year—but now that

it had become more common, he didn't shout for everyone to come look when a miner walked out with one.

Ridge jogged across the courtyard. Quite a few people, soldiers and miners, had gathered around the tram exit. An ore cart full of something that wasn't ore rested in front of the shaft. The dusty contents looked to be…

"Books?" Vespa asked, jogging too. "Dug out of the *mountain*?" Her face screwed up in disbelief.

Ridge was less surprised, having been warned of the Referatu by Sardelle. This must be the first true proof, other than the crystals themselves, as to a prior civilization living down there. One that had apparently had a mountain collapsed upon their heads.

Men moved aside for Ridge and the general to approach.

"We found 'em just this morning," a miner was saying, "and some old dusty carpets too."

Another miner standing beside him elbowed him and pointed to Ridge. "Tell them about the bones."

"I know, I know, I'm getting to it."

"Be quiet," General Nax snapped. "Everyone. Except you." He pointed to the first miner. "Explain everything. No one interrupt him."

Several men muttered yes-sirs. A couple of them glanced at Ridge, as if they felt betrayed he had allowed this more authoritative—or despotic, depending on how one looked at it—figure to take charge. He kept himself from rolling his eyes or doing anything else that would let the men know how he felt about Nax. Channeling some of Sardelle's maturity, perhaps. He took a deep breath and listened.

"It looked like an old room that had caved in. Part of some kind of underground fortress or castle or something. There were two crystals. Two! Within ten feet of each other. The engineer took those right away, but we brung up these books too. But, like Two-five-three said, there were bones too. All smashed from the rocks, but human skeletons for sure. Two of 'em that we got to right away. Could be more. Bunch of us are still digging down there."

The general was staring at the books and didn't seem to be paying attention.

"Good find," Ridge said. "Thank you for the hard work."

The miners knuckled their foreheads in something approximating a military salute. "Sure, boss. Sure."

"What *is* this?" General Nax asked, touching the spine of one of the books with a single finger. The title was written in Iskandian, albeit an archaic-looking version of the text, with more flowery touches than one usually saw on a book.

"What is it, Da?" Vespa squeezed past two men for a better look.

"Rituals of the Harvest Moon," Nax read, then jerked his finger

back. “Rituals. These are… sorcerous filth.” He looked at a few more titles. “All of them.”

“If this was a Referatu stronghold,” Vespa said, “those titles make sense.”

Ridge winced. He hadn’t told her that believing she would speak openly of it. A mistake. He shouldn’t have said anything at all, a notion reinforced when the general’s head whipped around. “Who told you that?”

Vespa looked at Ridge, a question in her eyes.

He snorted to himself. She might as well have thrust a finger at him.

“I heard it from a prisoner,” Ridge said when Nax’s scowl turned in his direction again. “I thought it might be an accepted fact in the academic world, so I brought it up to the professor.”

The miners were looking back and forth, sharing confused expressions. Ridge couldn’t blame them. They ought to be proud of finding such an old and unique find, but the general certainly wasn’t giving them that impression.

“Burn them,” Nax said. “Burn everything that comes out of there.”

“What?” came a familiar cry from the back of the crowd.

Ridge winced again. He couldn’t blame Sardelle for protesting this, especially if these artifacts were what had brought her all the way out here, but he wished she hadn’t let that cry slip out. In truth, it sounded like one of surprise as much as one of protest, and when he spotted her, wearing the usual prisoner’s garb and with a laundry basket in her arms, he also spotted the regret in her eyes, the cringe on her face. She, too, knew she had made a mistake.

Chapter 11

Sardelle kept her hands clasped behind her back and stared steadily at the snow in front of her. Ridge had warned her, and she had warned herself, yet when she had chanced upon that crowd, seen the books, and heard that vile proclamation from the general…

To destroy what little remained of her people, it was unthinkable. And yet, she had brought this about herself. If she hadn't been so eager to help Ridge find some crystals, the miners might never have delved into that half of the mountain. Now they might destroy every remaining piece of her culture.

That's not fair. You sent them that way to recover me. If anything, this is my fault.

That doesn't make the situation any better, Jaxi. I—we—miscalculated. We couldn't have foreseen Slug Breath taking command.

"Her record says Sardelle Sordenta," Captain Heriton was informing the general. Ridge stood a few feet back, his arms folded over his chest, his face flinty. Not at her, she knew, but at the situation. Heriton, of course, was smiling cheerfully. "A record that didn't appear until she had been in the fort for two or three days. When it appeared, it was in a spot I had already checked. It hadn't been there the day before. And then there's the fact that she was originally found wandering in the mines by a… "

Sardelle had heard the accusations before and listened in silence, watching as the books were unloaded from the cart and carried to an empty area in the center of the courtyard. Someone set a can of kerosene next to them.

If you don't do something, I will. Jaxi sounded as irritated by the situation as Sardelle.

I'm already on the verge of being accused of witchcraft here. What can I do? After I get you, it doesn't matter— Sardelle glanced at Ridge and admitted it would still matter, *—but until then, I can't let them…*

Kill you?

Yes.

That would be inconvenient. I've grown attached to you and missed you when you were sleeping for three centuries.

I'm glad to know you care. If you do something… don't hurt anyone, please.

The grumbles that sounded in Sardelle's head weren't encouraging, but she knew Jaxi wouldn't physically harm anyone unless it was to defend her. They had both taken oaths long ago to protect, not to hurt.

"You have anything to say, woman?" General Nax asked.

Sardelle shook her head.

"You knew about this spy, Colonel Zirkander?" Nax's voice grew soft, dangerous.

For a moment, Ridge looked like he might go with a mute answer as well, but his lips thinned, and he chose to say, "I don't know what she is, but if she's a spy, she's a considerate one. She's the one who pointed out the locations of the new crystals."

Sardelle didn't want him to get in trouble for defending her, but with so many eyes upon her, she didn't know how to signal him.

You don't think he's ready for telepathy?

Remembering the way he had lost his composure when she had teased him about being a telepath… she didn't think so, no. He had run afoul of sorcerers before, he had admitted as much. The moment she allowed him to find out she was one was the moment she lost… the only thing she had here. In the world.

The last of the books had been piled up, and a soldier uncapped the kerosene can.

"And how did *she* know the location of the crystals?" General Nax regarded her through slitted eyes.

"Is she the one who knew this was a Referatu stronghold?" the general's daughter asked, stepping forward and speaking for the first time.

Sardelle kept herself from frowning at Ridge, but it hurt a little to realize he must have been talking about her to this woman. Trying to defend her, she sensed, but she still wished he had said nothing. She could get herself into enough trouble without anyone else's help.

The soldier lit his match. Sardelle made a point of not looking in his direction as she snuffed it out. Nobody except the soldier noticed. Good. He had a whole box full of matches. Not good. Oops, it seemed the heads had grown damp in the snow at some point. The soldier tried to light several more before grumbling to himself and heading for one of the buildings.

"I *will* have answers to these questions," General Nax said. "If not nicely here, then in an interrogation room."

Ridge dropped his arms. "That's not called for, sir. She's been helping us."

"No doubt so she can steal the crystals once we've pulled them all

out. And take them back to wherever she's from. Did the Cofah plant you, girl?"

"I am Iskandian, through and through," Sardelle said. "I grew up in these mountains. I would not betray them to invaders."

The soldier returned, a fresh box of matches in his hand. She dampened them before he reached the pile of books.

"We'll see if you have the same answer when a little pressure is applied," the general said.

"Sir." Ridge stepped forward. "Are we really going to start torturing women, here?"

"You wouldn't object if she were a man. Spies can come in either sex, Colonel. Don't be naive."

"I haven't yet seen a reason to torture anyone. She's helping us. Don't you want to see how many crystals she can direct us to? If we can't keep a hold of them after that, that's our problem, isn't it?"

Nax scowled at him. "Isn't it, *sir*."

A muscle ticked in Ridge's cheek. Sardelle realized she hadn't seen him angry yet, not truly. He wouldn't do something to ruin his career on her behalf, would he? She couldn't let that happen.

"*Sir*," Ridge amended.

"I also think we should wait, sir," Captain Heriton said. "If she's truly the one who has been locating the crystals, we should use her as long as she's willing to help."

At first, Sardelle thought Heriton had changed his allegiance, deciding he liked Ridge more than the general, or at least that he liked the crystals more than he disliked her, but there was nothing friendly in his eyes as he regarded her. Even without brushing his mind, she could sense the suspicion there. More than that, she sensed he was perhaps the only one to have a true idea of what she was. Oh, he wouldn't think her a three-hundred-year-old sorcerer, but someone with a few mental tricks? Yes, that was exactly what he thought. Maybe he was waiting to say something until he had some evidence.

The soldier by the books cursed loudly enough to draw the general's attention. "What's your malfunction, private?"

"Sorry, sir. Can't find any matches that will light. Everything's damp."

"Odd," Heriton said, staring at Sardelle.

I think I'm going to have to come down to find you tonight, Jaxi. Whether the tunnels have been bored close enough or not.

I am more than ready to assist you in my un-burial.

"Damp," General Nax said. "Private, I don't want excuses. I want burned books. Throw them in a furnace if you have to."

"Yes, sir."

"Airship spotted," came a cry from atop the wall.

Sardelle had never been so pleased to see the enemy on the horizon.

The general cursed and jogged for the ramparts. His daughter, the captain, and most of the men gathered to watch the book burning did the same.

Ridge must have been itching to run up there, too, but he stepped up to her side. His gaze was on the sky, on the gold and wooden ship that had appeared over the western peak again. “I won’t let him torture you, though it will mean my career, if not my life. I understand this sword is worth a lot to you… ” He didn’t say, *but is it worth my life?* He must have been thinking it, but instead he sighed and looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “So you might want to disappear until you have the opportunity to retrieve it.”

Sardelle looked toward Tram Three, the shaft that led down to the room where the books had been found, the shaft that would get her as close to Jaxi as was possible. Ridge glanced over, following her gaze. He didn’t say anything else, merely walked toward the stairs, very deliberately not turning to look back at her.

Watch the books, Jaxi. I’m going down.

It’s about time.

. . . . .

A soft boom sounded to the north. A cannonball arced away from the Cofah airship and landed in a drift a hundred meters from the fort wall, sending up a shower of snow that was visible even down in the courtyard.

“We going to be ready for a test run today, Bosmont?” Ridge asked.

“Let’s see if we can start the engine first, eh, boss?” It couldn’t have been more than ten degrees, but the burly captain had his sleeves rolled up. Maybe all the tools he had squirreled away in his pockets kept him warm.

“If the engine starts, I’ll be tempted to hop right in and take off. Who’s to say it’ll start more than once, or stay started?”

“Have more faith, Colonel. This girl will purr like a kitten after all we’ve done to her.” Bosmont gave the engine a loving pat.

Ridge winced as his wrench slipped off a nut, his fist banging into the side of the compartment. That was what he got for tightening bolts at the same time as he was watching those bastards taking the range-finding shots.

The crystal glowing in its slot on top of the engine winked out. Bosmont frowned at it and slapped the casing, and it flared back to life.

“Auspicious,” Ridge said.

“Just a faulty connector. I’ll open it up and see if there’s more rust I

can scrape off."

A louder boom came from one of their own cannons. Ridge eyed the snow-covered peaks around them. Even though he had been the one to tell Sardelle that avalanches would be unlikely at this range, he had still deemed it wise to take all precautions, especially with the enemy out there, doubtlessly hoping to goad the fort into causing trouble for itself. Apparently General Nax wasn't worried about avalanches.

"Because his hairy gray ass wasn't caught in the last one," Ridge muttered.

"What's that?" Bosmont asked.

"Said I'm going to go up and check the weapons system. Just getting in the air won't be enough to scare off the Cofah."

"Ah, is *that* what you said? I thought I heard something about asses. Figured you were talking about the general."

"I'd never be that disrespectful." Ridge crawled under the control panel in the cockpit to check on the connectors leading to the repeating guns in the nose of the plane. Flying was important, but doing damage was even more crucial.

"Were you talking about his daughter? Because that's an ass I wouldn't mind respecting."

"You've been stationed here too long, Bosmont."

"Got that right." Something thunked shut. "I'm going to fire this dragon whelp up."

"Good, I—"

"Colonel," a voice said from outside the flier.

"Yes?" Ridge wriggled out from beneath the console.

Captain Heriton stood there, an open book in his hands. The ever-scowling General Nax stood behind him, along with his daughter. Ridge hoped neither of them had heard his engineer's comments.

"As it turns out, it's fortunate we didn't burn those books," Heriton said.

Fortunate? Hadn't they tried? "Oh?"

"Where's the witch?" Nax demanded.

"Who?"

"Your helpful witch girl."

"Sardelle?" Ridge rubbed his head. Why would they think… his gaze fell to the book, and his stomach sank into the bottom of the cockpit. It was open to a bunch of text he couldn't see well from there… and a picture he could. The face looking up at him, a slight knowing smiling turning up the corners of the mouth, was very familiar. But… how? "That's one of the books that was pulled out of the mine, isn't it?"

"Yes." Heriton pointed at the page. "According to this, Sardelle

Terushan was born three hundred and thirty-four years ago."

"How is that possible?"

"She's a witch is how," General Nax snarled. "And you've been aiding her since she showed up here. *More* than aiding her if the gossip can be believed." He squinted at Ridge. "Your career is over, boy. Now where is she?"

Ridge turned his back on them so he could climb down from the flier—and recover his equanimity. Or at least figure out how to mask his features and control the roiling unease in his belly.

"Even if she were a witch, I've never heard anything about tainted people being immortal," he reasoned, facing them again and holding out a hand for the book. "It must be a mistake. Maybe she was named after this person because of a resemblance."

Heriton didn't release the book, but he did hold it up so Ridge could see the pages better—and read the text. He puzzled through the entry. Apparently it was one of several in some sort of roster. The picture… damn, that was undeniably her. The words had been laid down with a printing press, but the portrait was hand-painted, its colors faded somewhat with time, though the book itself had been well preserved in its rocky tomb.

"Position… *sherastu?*" he wondered aloud, picking words from the description. "And healer." The latter made his stomach start writhing all over again. His hand drifted to his chest, where the scratches from the giant owl had healed extremely well, leaving only the faintest of scars. "Seven gods," he whispered.

"I repeat," Nax said, "*where* is she?"

Ridge met his hard eyes. "What are you going to do to her?"

"Answer the question, Colonel!" Nax lunged forward, as if to grab Ridge by the collar—or neck.

Reacting on instinct, Ridge stepped back. He thumped against the front of the flier, but he blocked the attack. The general barely seemed to notice. His finger came back in, this time pointing at Ridge's nose. "Boy, you've been helping her from the start. I've gotten the whole story."

When Ridge glanced at the captain, Heriton swallowed and looked away.

"Your career is dead. If you don't want to get pounded by a firing squad, you'll tell me where she is right now, and you'll damned well help us figure out a way to imprison her."

"You won't find anyone to shoot him here, Father," Vespa said. She had been watching this whole exchange with wide eyes, and lifted her hand a few times as if she wanted to intervene, but she ultimately let her arms fall to her sides.

"I'll shoot him myself," Nax roared.

"I've read that iron boxes are supposed to nullify their artifacts," Captain Heriton said. "Perhaps we could line one of the solitary confinement cells with iron, and she wouldn't be able to escape until… we've thoroughly questioned her."

"Gotten the location of the rest of the crystals, you mean?" Ridge asked.

"I don't care for your tone, Colonel," Nax said.

"What? Not sarcastic enough for you? I'll work on that."

"*Sir*," Heriton whispered. Nax was too busy fuming to respond.

"Look, General. I don't know where she went. I've—" Another boom drifted across the mountainside. Judging by where the snow flew up, that shot had landed much closer. Thanks to its elevated position, the airship had a greater range than the artillery weapons on the wall. "I don't have time to talk about this now. We're straw bales on the rifle range right now. We've got to get this flier off the ground to have a chance at defending ourselves against an air attack."

Heriton eyed the battered and dented craft. "If that's our only chance… " He must have decided morale wouldn't be served by voicing the rest, for he merely shut his book and walked away, shaking his head.

Nax still had smoke coming out of his ears, but his face had grown a shade less red. "Fix it up, Zirkander. But know that after we deal with the Cofah, you're joining the witch in a lead cell. I've got enough on you at this point to have you hanged tonight." He stalked off, shoulders bunched into knots.

"With that ability to inspire courage and devotion, it's shocking he doesn't command legions of troops." Ridge was talking to his engineer —who had never stopped tinkering with the engine, gods love the man for his single-mindedness—but Professor Vespa was still standing there. She stared back and forth between Ridge and her father's departing figure. He thought about apologizing to her for maligning the general but couldn't bring himself to do it. He merely touched the rim of his fur cap, offered a polite, "Ma'am," and pulled himself back into the flier.

"You know where the girl is?" Bosmont asked after they had finished ratcheting down that engine the best they could.

"Not really. You care?"

"Not really." The captain flashed a grin. "But if you had a way of warning her not to come back, you might want to do that. I figure Nax will have a squad of armed men waiting for her if she shows up again."

"I don't know how to contact her. I don't even know if I should if I could." Ridge removed his cap and rubbed his hands through his hair. No, he would warn her if he could, but he wouldn't… he couldn't

have anything to do with her after that. A sorceress. He had slept with… By all the gods, living and dead, how had he ended up with a sorceress in his fort? And had she ever cared a whit about him? Or had she been using him to get to what she wanted? Pretending she was helping him find those crystals, but secretly wanting the tunnels dug in a certain direction so she could get that sword? *Her* sword, he realized belatedly. Or one she wanted to use for some reason, doubtlessly a magical blade to increase her power. Wasn't that what the stories said? What would she do once she had it?

"Do me a favor, will you, Bosmont?"

"What?"

"Sneak me in a beer every once in a while once I've been court martialed, and I'm a prisoner here."

"Will do, boss."

Chapter 12

Sardelle knelt near the bottom of the tram shaft, crouching behind a cage. A few feet away, two soldiers stood to either side of the tunnel, their backs to the wall. The clanks, scrapes, and curses drifting out of a couple of the passages announced more people nearby. There were a lot of men she would have to sneak past to reach the freshly excavated tunnels.

A few ore carts had been left on a rail part way down one of the shafts, each full of dirt to be dumped. She waved her hand, and they rolled into the chamber.

"What the—"

"Who pushed those out here?" one of the soldiers demanded, striding toward the tunnel they had come out of.

As soon as he was even with them, Sardelle shoved the cart over. Dirt spilled out onto his boots. The man stumbled back, cursing, and his comrade ran toward the tunnel entrance.

Sardelle made a hard right, obfuscating her form so they wouldn't see anything more than rock, albeit a moving rock, if they glanced over. They were more focused on the tunnel and the ore carts. She slipped into a different passage, the one that should lead to the newly opened area where the miners had found the crystals—and the books.

Jaxi did the telepathic equivalent of clearing her throat. *Speaking of those books…*

Yes?

Did you know some of the annual rosters were in that pile? The ones showing where everyone who does field work is currently stationed?

No.

You should have let that soldier burn the books.

Sardelle forced herself to keep padding down the tunnel, passing through the shadows between each lantern hanging on the wood supports, though she wanted to stop and spend a few minutes cursing and kicking things. *They found something with me in it?*

Yes.

Did… Ridge see it?

Yes.

So he knows who—what—I am now?

He does. Everyone does.

Oh.

Sardelle kept walking though her legs felt numb. What else could she do? All that was left to her was to get Jaxi and go… where? She had no idea.

Somewhere you won't be hanged, drowned, or shot.

Yeah? And where's that? Sardelle remembered the shaman's offer, but the thought of going off with him made her stomach twist in knots.

I'm not sure yet. We'll find it.

Damn. Sardelle didn't want to leave, not by herself anyway. She wanted Ridge to come with her. Or she would have stayed here with him if that abominable general left… and he still wanted her to stay. She could help defend the mountain from enemies. It wasn't that different from the work she had done before.

Are you sure you want *to defend these people? People who would kill you if they got a chance?*

Ridge wouldn't.

When an answer didn't come, the silence unnerved Sardelle. What did Jaxi know that she didn't? Sardelle was tempted to reach up through the layers of rock and try to find Ridge up in that courtyard. He would doubtlessly be back at that aircraft. Or up on the wall if the Cofah were attacking.

She jerked at the reminder that the enemy airship was up there. This wasn't the time to worry about loves lost. She shifted from a walk to a jog, running between the iron tracks in the center of the tunnel. Only when the sounds of voices reached her ears did she slow down again. The bangs and clanks had grown much louder too. She sensed… no less than ten people working at the end of the shaft. Extra men must have been funneled into the area after the book discovery.

Any ideas on how to get those men to take a lunch break, Jaxi?

The owl is back.

Er, the shaman's pet?

He seems to have sent it ahead. It's harassing the men up top.

While the airship sneaks in unnoticed?

Jaxi didn't answer for a moment. Sardelle crept farther down the tunnel, until a half-full ore cart came into view, along with the back of the man loading it.

It's still staying out of range, but that may change. It's possible the shaman realized you're not up in the courtyard anymore.

Me?

You're probably the only reason they didn't come in and try a more committed attack earlier. The fort's defenses are paltry. It's clear that when

this place was built, attacks from the air weren't common yet.

Yes, they need someone to make it out of here to inform the rest of the military of this problem. Sardelle thought there was room enough in that partially filled ore cart for her to hide in, but she needed to convince all of the men to leave for a while.

Methane, Jaxi suggested.

That's poisonous.

Thus why it would scare them away, at least until their ventilation system could be extended down into these new tunnels.

That… might actually work. Is there some down here we could siphon into the tunnel? Of course, I'd have to think about how to shield myself. The real gas would be rather poisonous to me too.

Why not just make them think *they smell methane?*

Sardelle grimaced at the thought of tinkering in people's minds. *That's a little ethically ambiguous.*

Less painful than rashes.

Sardelle sighed and leaned her head against the earthen wall.

I'll handle it. You can keep your ethics pure.

Sardelle should have objected, but she didn't. She didn't know how much time she had and how long it would take to dig out Jaxi.

She waited for the miner near the cart to move forward around the bend, then trotted up and hopped in. There was a box of dynamite next to the wall. If she couldn't pry Jaxi out with magic, she supposed explosives were an alternative. Though she might end up burying both of them if she tried that.

She curled into a ball and camouflaged herself to blend in with the rubble beneath her. *I'm ready.*

Already working on them.

"You smell that?" someone asked.

The scrapes of pickaxes died away. "What?" A few noisy sniffs sounded. "Is that gas?"

"It's leaking out of somewhere. Back up, get back."

The thuds of boots approached the cart, then shadows fell across Sardelle as the men raced past. She held her breath. She knew she was camouflaged, but it was hard ignoring the feeling that she was in plain sight as they trotted past. One frowned down at her, opened his mouth as if he might say something, but the man behind him gave him a shove, and he continued on. That one might have a few drops of dragon blood running through his veins if he had sensed something off about her illusion. She hoped that wouldn't come back to trouble her later.

Just get me, and we'll worry about it then.

Feeling antsy, are you?

It has *been three hundred years.*

Everyone cleared out without further trouble, and Sardelle climbed out of the cart. She grabbed a couple of the sticks of dynamite before jogging toward the end of the tunnel. She hoped she could reach Jaxi without using dangerous explosives, but there were limits to what she could do against a mountain.

I'm about two hundred meters from the end of their tunnel.

Sardelle grabbed the last lantern hanging on the wall before the passage grew dark and narrow, fresh earth upturned along the sides, waiting to be shoveled into carts.

You're almost there.

I'll need you to lend me some of your power, Jaxi.

That works best when you're holding me, but you know I'll try. I don't want to be burned along with the rest of the artifacts those people pull out of here.

I'm sure you could withstand the heat of their incinerator.

Maybe so, but I don't relish the sunburn.

A low passage to Sardelle's right made her pause, one that opened into a room. Ah, this was where they had pulled out the books. She ducked into the space and walked a few paces, holding the lantern aloft. She gave it extra energy, so the flame flared, and she could make out the smashed remains of what had once been bookshelves and carpets. The air smelled stale, and the ceiling had been caved in completely in places, but part of the room had withstood the quaking, thanks to a couple of sturdy marble supports still standing. Sardelle touched one, the stone cool and smooth. The miners had already removed most of the artifacts—odd to think of books and trappings she had passed by mere weeks ago, as far as her brain knew, as artifacts now—but there would be others in the mountain. She wished there were a way to recover them, to preserve them, instead of letting them be taken out to be destroyed, or perhaps carted off as quirky treasures.

She climbed back into the main tunnel before Jaxi could remind her that one particular "artifact" was the priority.

The ceiling lowered further, the walls raw from fresh pickaxe gouges, and Sardelle was crouching by the time she reached the end of the passage. She set down the lantern and touched the wall. She felt Jaxi's aura through the rock, calling her hand like a beacon. Fifteen degrees to the left and about twenty degrees downward. The miners would have gotten closer, but they never would have chanced across the sword. That was, she reminded herself, what she had wanted.

Here goes, she warned Jaxi.

She burned into the rock with her mind, winnowing a small hole, as if she were a termite gnawing through wood. She would widen it later, but for now, she emulated water, finding the route of least

resistance. At first, the way was easy. Some of this was, after all, rock that had already been excavated once, rather than the solid core of the mountain, so much of it was packed rubble rather than solid slab. But she reached a spot where nothing except several meters of granite lay ahead.

The dynamite?

I'd hate to cause a cave-in. Especially when I'm standing here. Give me time—I can burn through. Sardelle's thighs ached, so she dropped to her knees. How long had she already been at it?

You may not have time.

The miners are coming back?

Not yet, but something is going on up top. People gathering.

All right… Sardelle inserted one of the cylindrical sticks into the hole she had created, then pushed it through with her mind. She had to widen the hole in places to maneuver it around bends, but she would have had to widen the tunnel anyway to get Jaxi out.

Soon the stick nestled against the granite. She lit the fuse with a thought, then retreated to the wooden supports farther back in the tunnel. As the flame burned closer to the stick, a fit of panic washed over her. She imagined the mountain falling all about her, as it had that horrible day weeks—centuries—before. She almost sprinted all the way back to the tram, but there wasn't time.

With all that intervening rock, the explosion was muffled. A faint tremor ran beneath Sardelle's feet, but the massive cave-in she had worried about didn't come.

Did that even do any good?

Big hole, Jaxi replied. *Come back. Keep going.*

Sardelle checked her termite-passage. "Hole" wasn't the precise word, as it was still filled with rock, but now the granite was crumbled, and she could continue burrowing down. She wiped sweat out of her eyes. A dull ache had started in her head—though all she was doing was standing there, the mental work was wearying. She was thinking of telling Jaxi she needed to rest when a fresh wave of energy surged into her. Even separated, a soulblade had power to share if it wanted.

You're close.

Sardelle came across something metallic sooner than expected, but it wasn't Jaxi. Right, she had been buried in a training room among a lot of practice blades. Sardelle wagered the soldiers up above wouldn't be so quick to destroy *those* types of relics. She weaved past what must have been a rack of swords and shields, and kept going, drawn closer until—

Yes!

Sardelle smiled. *You see the light?*

No, but I got a draft of fresh air. Make that stale air.

I didn't know swords were connoisseurs of air.

We're not. I'll take anything.

Sardelle wrapped a mental hand around Jaxi's hilt and began the task of pulling her back through the small tunnel. She was distracted midway by water dribbling out of the hole she had made in the main passage.

Uh, are you wet, Jaxi?

Yes, it's ruining my stale air, but I'll survive.

The water turned from a dribble to a faster flow. Sardelle shifted away from the opening and returned to navigating the soulblade through the tight passage, though she let her awareness seep into the rocks around, searching for the source of the water. It seemed to be coming from behind that huge slab of granite she had broken up. Her first silly thought was that one of the pipes her people had installed to supply indoor plumbing had erupted, but surely that had happened long ago. This was probably some hidden spring she had stumbled across. A spring that—

Hurry, Jaxi urged. *Something's groaning in here. It sounds like a dam about to burst.*

Great.

At least they were close. Sardelle stretched out her hand, certain Jaxi's sleek steel form would float out of the hole at any moment.

But an alarming crack emanated from the rock first. The mountain groaned, not just from the direction of the granite, but all around her. A tremor ran beneath her feet, this one fiercer than the one the dynamite had caused. And it was followed by a second and a third, until Sardelle had to brace herself against the tunnel wall to keep from tumbling to her knees. Behind her, dirt shifted and trickled down from the ceiling.

With single-minded determination, Sardelle kept her focus on Jaxi, on pulling the blade out, on—

There. The soulblade flew out point first on a gush of water that spattered Sardelle in the chest. The sword might have struck her, too, but it flared with a silvery glow and pivoted in the air. The hilt came to rest in her hand, even though Sardelle had been focused more on flailing and staggering back from the gushing water than on catching it.

Go, Jaxi urged, the word echoing in Sardelle's head with twice the power now that they were touching.

She would have sprinted away regardless. More than dirt was falling around her now. With the shaking of the earth, rocks flew free and smashed down from the ceiling with the intensity of meteors slamming into the earth. Thanks to Jaxi enhancing her mental energy,

forming a shield around herself was a simple matter, but neither of them had the power to unbury themselves if the mountain fell on them.

Sardelle leaped ore carts and abandoned tools as rocks and dirt bounced off her barrier, inches from her shoulders and head. A boulder as big as she was crashed down not three feet in front of her. She almost smacked into it—Jaxi did gouge a chunk of it away before Sardelle stopped. There was no way around it, so she climbed up the side. There was only a foot of space at the top, and she had to suck everything in to squeeze between the boulder and the dirt ceiling. Rocks clawed at her shield.

The lighting grew dimmer—the lanterns behind her being shaken out or smothered by dust. She glanced back, and her heart nearly jumped out of her chest. It wasn't dust. A torrent of water was racing toward her, knocking off the lanterns and dousing them as it rushed closer.

She scrambled the rest of the way across the boulder, tearing her fingernails in her effort to pull herself over faster. She tumbled down the other side, managing to land on her feet, then sprinted again. The open chamber at the base of the tram came into view.

Almost there. Ten more steps. Five.

At three steps, the river smashed into her back. Her shield kept it from hurting and dulled some of the iciness, but it didn't keep the flow from sweeping her up into its grasp. The force knocked her into a wall and then tumbled her feet over head, mocking the power she thought she had.

If not for the big chamber, Sardelle would have drowned in a tunnel flooded with water, but the flow spread out, its height diminishing. She scrambled to her feet as it gushed out around her. Thinking she would have to deal with guards, she lifted the sword, ready to deflect bullets if she had to. But nobody was there. A good thing, since Jaxi was glowing like a comet.

Calm that down some, will you?

Sorry. I'm excited to be out.

It'll be hard to sneak out of the fort with you outshining the sun.

Is that the next goal? Out of the fort?

Sardelle thought of Ridge. It pained her to say it, but she whispered, "I think it has to be."

Water continued to gush out of the tunnel they had exited. Some of it was being funneled into other tunnels, but the level was rising in the chamber too. Sardelle sloshed toward a cage resting at the base of the tram shaft. It would be easier to sneak out if she climbed up the long passage, but going up would be much harder than sliding down it had been. Even on the way in, it had been a tedious slog.

Speaking of slogging… More water coursed toward the shaft, making the cage wobble on its track.

Yes, I'm hurrying. Sardelle pulled open the cage door.

She waved at the lever outside. It flipped upward, but the machine that powered the tram groaned. Its big flywheels were half underwater.

Uh oh.

We might be climbing after all, Jaxi thought.

We? You have some legs tucked under your hilt that you're going to use to help?

Hush. I'll see if I can get that machinery moving.

Sardelle had the engineering knowledge of an ox, so she was happy to leave that task to Jaxi. The ever-rising water level made her nervous though. "We can always get out and climb if we have to," she muttered.

She imagined the water rising up the tram shaft, threatening to drown her if she couldn't climb quickly enough.

No, numerous other levels existed above them with countless miles of tunnels. It would take an ocean to flood them all, and even if she had chanced across a spring that big, it would take a long time for all that water to fill in.

A thunderous crack sounded, so loud Sardelle brought her hands to her ears for protection, clanging the sword on the roof of the cage. More cracks followed, each one like an explosion of dynamite.

Jaxi, if you can't get that contraption moving…

The cage lurched. Sardelle couldn't hear it over the snapping rock and groaning earth all around her, but she felt it. After a few awkward trembles that nearly hurled her into the walls, the cage started upward. It bumped and twitched, as if it were going over rocks on the tracks—and maybe it was—but it continued upward.

You were doubting me?

Who, me?

All the lights disappeared below, swallowed by water and collapsing rocks. Jaxi didn't know if the entire level had gone down, but she prayed that all of the miners had fled because of the ruse with the gas.

Guess they won't be finding and burning any more artifacts for a while. Jaxi sounded smug.

Sardelle couldn't summon a similar emotion. She hadn't meant to create all that chaos. She was lucky to be alive.

She lifted her gaze toward the top of the shaft. Darkness must have fallen while she was digging around, for she couldn't pick out anything. Had the soldiers and miners above heard all the noise? Did they know she was down there? She stretched out with her senses…

and cringed.

No less than fifty people were gathered around the mouth of the shaft. She doubted they had come together to play card games. She also doubted that their presence had anything to do with enemy attacks—everyone would have been on the walls then.

Maybe we should stop the cage and climb out, Sardelle suggested. But what would that do? She would have to crawl up the steep, slick shaft, and she had a feeling those people would still be waiting there when she arrived.

Yes.

Yes, we should stop it, or yes, they'll be waiting?

They've been there a while.

Sardelle remembered Jaxi's earlier warning.

Because of me. She didn't make it a question.

Yes.

Sardelle made sure Jaxi wasn't glowing as the cage traveled the final meters. If she had to, she could fight her way out, shielding herself from bullets and blades the same way she had against falling rocks, but she didn't want to warn anyone of her powers by emerging with a glowing sword. Although thanks to that book, they probably already knew what to expect. And even if she fought her way past everyone, what then? Magical talents or not, she wouldn't be able to navigate that pass in the winter, not without a ship. She wasn't about to call down that shaman for a ride.

It's a possibility.

She shuddered—or maybe shivered, thanks to being wet and feeling the icy drafts coming down from above. *No. It's not.*

Maybe she could figure out how to fly Ridge's dragon contraption. Powering it wouldn't be a problem, but the rest? She had been daunted by the simple tram machine.

"Let's just see what's waiting for us," she muttered.

She might have sensed fifty people, but when they came into sight, it seemed like a thousand torches out there surrounding the tram cage. After the ride up in the darkness, Sardelle squinted at the light. It didn't keep her from seeing all the rifles aimed at her. Even miners were armed, albeit with pickaxes. Fear hung in the air. Fear of her? Gods, she had been helping them all month. How could they forget about that? How could they think she was an enemy now?

Through the cage bars, she spotted General Nax at the back of the crowd—he also had a rifle aimed in her direction. Ridge stood next to him. He had a rifle, but the butt rested on the ground. Only his frown was aimed at her. Somehow that was worse than all of the weapons.

Sardelle blinked back tears. A sorceress striding out to fight shouldn't be weeping.

I can send the cage back down if you want.

It's flooded by now, I'm sure.

Not all the levels…

Sardelle shook her head. With all of those men, Nax could guard this exit indefinitely, and she couldn't stay down there forever.

She was tired after her ordeal below, but she threw her remaining strength into a shield around her body, then pushed open the gate door. The men tensed, their fingers tight on their triggers, but nobody fired.

Of course not. The general wants to know where the rest of the crystals are first.

Hopelessly mired under the new lake, I hope. Sardelle held her arms out and let the soulblade dangle in her grip. Unthreateningly.

She met Ridge's eyes. He didn't look away, but he did mask his expression. She could have probed a little and figured out what he was thinking… but she had a feeling she didn't want to know.

"Take her sword," General Nax said.

Her hand tightened on the hilt. Fight now or fight later? If she fought now, she risked hurting a lot of people. She ought to be able to escape whatever cell they locked her in and find Jaxi later. At night, when most people would be sleeping.

Sighing, she turned the soulblade, extending it hilt first toward one of the twitchy privates who crept forward. Once she was unarmed, two other soldiers walked up, grabbed her by the backs of her arms, and steered her toward a building she knew held cells. She looked up at the sky, at stars so big and bright they seemed touchable, and hoped she hadn't made the wrong choice.

She almost tripped at a sight below the stairs—while she had been down in the tunnels, one of the wall towers had been obliterated. Now that she was out of the crowd, she could see rubble in the courtyard, too, dark rocks against the stark snow drifts. So, she had missed the first real battle. How had it gone? Had Ridge and the others driven off the Cofah? Brought down their ship?

You found a soulblade, came a hungry and unwelcome thought in her head.

Sardelle's shoulders slumped. The shaman. He, at least, was still alive.

Now I see why you've been here, what you wanted. Brilliant.

Thank you, Sardelle responded though she knew it was more Jaxi's existence he found brilliant than anything she had done.

A soft laugh sounded in her thoughts as the soldiers led her into a cell-filled basement hallway. *Better sleep with it under your pillow. As rare as they are anymore, I'll be looking for it when we return.*

Ugh. Not three minutes had passed, and she was already certain she

had made the wrong decision. Jaxi was getting locked in some office or supply closet—where a powerful shaman would have no trouble finding the blade—and Sardelle was getting locked in a cell.

A heavy iron door thumped shut behind her, and a latch was thrown. Utter darkness filled the tiny room.

I think we need to break out tonight, Jaxi.

Sardelle expected an answer along the lines of, "That's obvious," but she didn't get an answer at all.

Jaxi?

Silence.

She realized with an alarming start that she couldn't *feel* Jaxi anymore, either. Not on the fort, not anywhere. Even when the soulblade had been buried in the mountain, she had sensed it. What had they done? Thrown Jaxi off a cliff?

Sardelle dropped her hands to her knees and told herself hyperventilating wouldn't do her any good. The advice didn't help.

Chapter 13

Sardelle needed to escape and find Jaxi—wherever the soulblade was—but she had to wait until some of those milling soldiers and miners went to their beds. Maybe the guard outside her door would grow less alert too. She paced in circles around the tiny cell. The carnage she had left down below had people buzzing around the courtyard, going up and down on the tram. And she sensed Ridge and the engineer working on the flier again. Er, wait. No, he wasn't up there anymore. She swept across the fort with her senses—others she might not have been able to identify so readily, but she knew his aura well by now. She halted in the middle of her circle and faced the door.

He was on his way down here.

To see her? Her heart swelled with relief, but the emotion soon faltered. She didn't know what he felt, what he wanted. Maybe the general knew they'd had a relationship and had decided to send Ridge to question her. And if, instead of strong-arming her, he gave her that quirky smile, she would tell him whatever he wanted. No, she would do that anyway. What did the crystals matter to her? What mattered was finding Jaxi. She would trade him whatever information he wanted if he gave her the soulblade's location.

It took Ridge longer than she expected to come down the stairs and into her hallway of cells. There was an uncharacteristic anxiousness about him. Those pauses… was he stopping to listen? To glance back over his shoulder? The general hadn't sent him at all, she realized. He was sneaking down. Did he know about the guard? What was he going to say to the man?

Soft murmurs started up outside the door. Sardelle leaned her ear against the cold iron, but she still couldn't make out words.

A soft thunk sounded below her ear—a key turning in the lock. She stepped back.

"Sardelle?" Ridge whispered, pushing open the door a couple of inches.

"Yes." Ridiculous that her heart was beating so loudly that he could probably hear it. His opinion of her shouldn't matter so much. But it did. She could fight against everyone else in the fort, but she didn't

want to fight him.

"I thought you might have sneaked away already." Ridge stepped inside, a lantern in hand.

The hallway outside was dark, and Sardelle didn't see the guard. Ridge leaned his back against the wall, not coming close.

She tried not to let that distance sting. He was here at least.

"Not without Ja—my sword."

"Ah." Did he sound hurt by her answer? Did her feelings toward him still matter?

"And," Sardelle added, "I would not wish to leave you without… " Knowing if he still cared? Knowing if he could possibly see past that which he feared in her?

Ridge sighed. "Saying goodbye?"

"No. I mean, I… don't want to say goodbye."

Sardelle shifted from foot to foot in the silence that followed. She didn't regret saying the words, but… maybe she should have waited and let him talk first.

"You're not saying anything," she observed oh-so-helpfully.

"You can't read my thoughts?"

"I… don't. We aren't like that. Very few ever were, except for those who went rogue and… quite literally ruined the world for the rest of us. There are rules that we swear by and hold dearly. Or did."

After another long pause, Ridge asked, "How old are you?"

"Thirty-four."

"How… "

"This is… hard to believe—trust me, I had a hard time believing it myself when I woke up, but I basically… missed three hundred years."

The single lantern didn't provide a lot of light, and Ridge's face—which had been carefully neutral through most of their conversation—didn't change much, though his bottom lip did lower a few millimeters.

"I was here when the original attack came that collapsed this mountain," Sardelle said. "It was actually… your ancestors, I suppose. They figured out a way to sap in beneath our community when nearly everyone was home for a big celebration, and… I'm not sure how it happened exactly or where they found such powerful explosives—your dynamite hadn't been invented yet, so far as I know—but it was devastating."

"My ancestors." He sounded like he didn't want to believe her.

Sardelle shrugged. "Well, maybe not *yours* specifically. Yours might have been off inventing flying machines somewhere."

She watched him, hoping for a smile, but he was either too stunned or wasn't believing anything she said.

"Ridge," she said, then paused, half-expecting him to tell her not to

call him by first name anymore. He didn't. "The sword. It's mine. I don't mean in the I-found-it-so-I-have-the-strongest-claim-on-it way, but in the… we were bonded when I was sixteen and passed my exams. There's a spirit inside… that of someone who was once a sorceress but who died young and placed her soul in the blade so she could continue to live on, in a manner of speaking. This happened over three—er, six hundred years ago, and Jaxi has been bonded with several handlers since then, but most recently with me."

Somewhere during her speech, Ridge had leaned back against the wall, one hand propped on his hip. If he weren't holding the lantern with the other, he probably would have propped that one up too. The stance said… I'm not buying this.

"I don't need you to believe all that," Sardelle said, "and it's perfectly understandable if you don't, but I just wanted you to know what Jaxi—the sword means to me. She's all I have left of my family, my friends, my *life*." Her voice broke, and she took a few breaths, struggling for equilibrium. The last few weeks had been busy enough to distract her from all she had lost—aside from a few nights in those awful barracks when she had allowed herself to weep silently—but that didn't mean the emotions weren't there, hovering beneath the surface.

Ridge stirred, lifting a hand toward her, but he let it drop again. Uncertain.

"I… sense that something's been done," Sardelle said when she could find a more normal tone again. "You don't owe me anything, but if you could tell me where she—the sword—is, I would appreciate it."

"Actually, I owe you… much. More than what I thought, I'm beginning to realize."

Was that why he was here? Because he felt he *owed* her something?

Sardelle swallowed. It was better than not having him talking to her at all, and yet… she wished he had come simply because he cared.

"What's a *sherastu*?" he asked.

"It's a title. Mage advisor. We worked alongside the military and the clan leaders to defend Iskandia from the Cofah and other invaders."

Ridge nodded to himself. "This afternoon, when that owl showed up again, distracting us so the airship could sneak in for attacks, no odd little blasts of wind hit it."

So, she hadn't been as circumspect as she had hoped with her attacks. "Sorry. I was busy down there. I didn't know the fort was under attack."

"Yes, when the general got the report on the devastation down there, his face turned so red, I thought he would pass out."

“What happened down there wasn’t intentional,” Sardelle said. “I was just trying to get the sword. If I’d had more time, I could have been more careful. I wasn’t expecting… a water source.”

“Nax is certain you sabotaged the tunnels on purpose so we couldn’t pull out any more crystals.”

“I almost crushed and drowned myself in the process. I assure you it wasn’t intentional. Also… these crystals you value so much, they’re meaningless to me. They were our light fixtures.”

“I believe you. I—did you say *light* fixtures?” For the first time, a hint of Ridge’s humor shown through. Tickled by the concept, was he? Good.

“They hung on the ceilings. Honestly, if you gave me a few days to study, I could probably make them for you.”

Ridge’s response was somewhere between a snort, a cough, and maybe that was a laugh. “Well, that would be one more argument I could make for keeping you alive.” His comment sobered him though. He stepped forward, his face grim. “The Cofah are on the horizon again, or the general might already be down here with his… chosen interrogator. He thinks you’re too dangerous to keep alive. You need to… ” He glanced toward the hallway, perhaps making sure the guard hadn’t returned. “You need to not be here when he comes.”

“Did you come to leave the door open for me?”

“Do I… need to do that? That young man out there—” Ridge waved toward the hallway, “—he’ll be back soon, and he respects me. I would rather not have him think I’m a traitor. I just… wanted to make sure you knew and that you could find a way out on your own.” He gazed into her eyes. “Can you?”

“Yes. I was waiting for things to quiet down out there, and I was… hyperventilating a little because I couldn’t communicate—er, feel—my sword.” Sardelle studied his face. She wanted to ask him if telling her Jaxi’s location would make him a traitor in his people’s eyes—or in his own, which probably mattered more to him, no matter what he had said about the guard. But at the same time, she didn’t want to press him to go against his morals. She could find it on her own. Someone else would have the information and she could, despite what she had told Ridge, access it.

“It’s in an iron box in what used to be my office and is now Nax’s,” Ridge said.

Iron. Of course. It blocked the sensing of magic in a way miles of stone didn’t. Sardelle slumped against the wall. Jaxi was in an office fifty meters away, not at the bottom of some distant chasm. “I see your people haven’t forgotten *all* Referatu lore in the last three centuries.”

“Heriton studied up after he found that book.” Ridge wanted to say

more—his thoughts burned at the front of his mind with such intensity that she got the gist without trying to read him. He wanted to elicit a promise from her that she wouldn't hurt anyone on the way to retrieving her sword, but he didn't want to have to ask. He wanted to trust her. He just wasn't sure anymore.

Though that uncertainty stung, Sardelle chose to see it as a good sign. In time, maybe he would get used to the idea of her as a sorceress. Maybe…

She shook her head. She would worry about that later. For now, she had to escape and retrieve Jaxi before the mob dragged her out for a shooting.

"Thank you for the information," Sardelle said. "I'll be careful. Nobody will see me."

Ridge exhaled slowly, surreptitiously. "Good."

Sardelle sensed someone walking into the building upstairs. "My guard is returning."

Ridge glanced toward the hallway. "I'll… try not to find it disturbing that you knew that before I did." He sighed and looked back at her, holding her eyes for a moment.

Hoping for a kiss would be too much at this point, and yet…

"Want to rub my dragon?" Ridge asked.

Sardelle blinked. "What?"

He fished the wooden figurine out of his pocket.

"Oh." She offered a sheepish shrug—that was *not* where her mind had gone—and stuck her hand out. Enh, why not?

Feeling silly, she rubbed the belly of the wooden dragon and handed it back to Ridge.

"Sir?" the guard asked from the hallway.

"Yes, I'm done." Ridge pocketed his lucky charm. "Thank you, Private."

The young man squinted into the cell, assessing Sardelle but not quite meeting her eyes. "You're brave, sir."

"Uh huh." Ridge stepped into the hall.

"Is it going to be all right for me to be out here, sir?" the private whispered. "General Nax said the iron door was supposed to keep her from getting out, but I… I also heard—*overheard*—him tell someone I was expendable."

Ridge snorted. "*Nax* is expendable. You'll be fine, soldier. Now, shut the door, eh? We wouldn't want her to escape."

"Yes, sir. Of course."

The door thumped shut, and if the men spoke further, Sardelle didn't hear it. An iron door? They thought that would keep her in here? If they had lined the whole cell in iron, it would have kept her from sensing or communicating with the outside world, but it

wouldn't have done anything to nullify her actual power. Still, Sardelle couldn't help but feel very alone again when the key thunked in the lock. Ridge had helped her, but she also had a feeling that had been a goodbye as well.

. . . . .

Ridge hadn't taken more than three steps out of the confinement building when shouts started up on the wall.

"They're coming again."

"To the weapons!"

Ridge couldn't spot the airship in the night sky yet, but he trusted the lookouts. He jogged not to the wall but to the flier perched on its landing legs near the frozen stream, its hull as clean and rust-free as it was going to get. He wasn't surprised to find Captain Bosmont standing next to a wing, the engine already humming in the back of the craft.

"Ready for that test run, sir?" he asked.

Ridge glanced toward the horizon. "Yes."

"I figured you might be. Got her as ready as I could while everyone was worrying about our witch."

Ridge's jaw tightened at the word witch, but he didn't correct Bosmont. That didn't matter now. Getting in the sky and helping the fort did. "Thank you, Captain."

"If anyone can take that airship down, you can."

Ridge climbed into the cockpit. "I appreciate your faith."

"Good. But you should also know, if you wreck this baby I spent so many hours on, I'm going to hunt you down in whatever level of hell they stick you in."

"I'll keep that in mind, Captain."

"Oh, and one more thing, sir," Bosmont said, a grin splitting his broad face. "I made a little something extra for you, to keep you warm up there."

"Chicken soup?"

"Not exactly." The engineer winked. "They're down by your feet."

No sooner had Ridge slid into the stitched up leather cockpit seat and pulled his harness across his chest when an irritated call came up from below. "Where in all the cursed realms do you think you're going, Colonel?"

"To stop that airship, General."

"Were you going to ask for permission first or just do whatever you felt like, as usual?"

Ridge smirked down at the man. "The latter, naturally."

He fired up the lift thrusters, drowning out Nax's reply. He was going to be in so much trouble after this was all sorted out that it

hardly mattered what he did at this point. Maybe if he took down the Cofah airship, his disrespect—and his dalliance with Sardelle—might be forgotten or at least treated with lenience. And if he failed utterly against the Cofah… the only threat he had to worry about was Bosmont's.

When the thrusters pushed into the earth, the engineer and general scurrying back, and the flier inched off the ground, Ridge let out a relieved breath. If he hadn't gotten off the ground, he would have felt idiotic about his insubordination. But the craft responded to his touch, if more sluggishly than he would have preferred. The crystal in the back glowed, illuminating his control panel. At least that was at full power. A ceiling light. The ridiculousness of it all almost made him throw his head back and laugh.

Later. The Cofah ship was visible now, not hovering above the distant peaks, but sailing straight toward the fort.

Ridge hit the switch that lowered a cover over the crystal, and the light disappeared. No need to make it obvious to the enemy that he was coming. His hands knew the controls well; he didn't need to see to fly this craft.

As it rose above the fort walls, wind whipped through his short hair, and the chill air burned his ears. Usually he would have a leather cap and goggles, but he hadn't been expecting to fly out here. All of his piloting gear was back in his locker on base. Tonight, he would have to make do without. One way or another, he doubted he would be in the sky long.

Once he had enough altitude, Ridge nudged the controls, taking the flier toward a rocky ridge the airship was paralleling. Maybe he could sneak behind her that way—the dark metal hull blending in with the bare slope—and attack from behind while the Cofah were focused on the cannons and rocket launchers in the fort. The soft clink-thunks of the engine shouldn't be audible over the wind and the airship's own machinery. He hoped.

Ridge took the flier to a higher altitude than the airship, though he was careful to keep the rocks behind him, and not the snow. He would stand out like a beacon against a white backdrop. Higher was often better, though, especially with airship captains who rarely took their slow-moving craft into battles. When they did, they were often used to looking down to drop bombs, not up to fend off attacks.

The men on the deck were visible as Ridge passed by, bundled so heavily against the icy wind that they seemed to waddle from place to place. The number of people manning the cannons disturbed him. Not only that, but the sheer number of cannons. He supposed he should have expected that, based on the damage the craft had done to the fort during its last attack. Clearly this particular airship had been

created for war, maybe even specifically for this mission: to destroy the only source of the Iskandian dragon flier power supplies.

Ridge was tempted to bank and veer in, tilting his wings as he flew by so he could strafe the deck with his bullets. They were preparing something to one side, a smaller balloon and a big basket. An escape craft? Something for launching bombs? Or maybe for delivering troops. He almost attacked it, but he wanted to go for a more important target on his first run. He could only surprise them once.

The flier passed the airship, and, staying above them, keeping the stars at his back, he glided through a turn. He grimaced at the pull in the controls, the jerky way the craft responded. Tonight's run might be all she had in her. He could only hope it was enough.

He leveled the craft and headed toward the back of the airship. If this one was true to other Cofah designs, the engines would be in the rear, hidden below decks and behind those wooden planks, planks that might be reinforced with metal. The airships might *look* a lot like the Cofah sailing ships that plundered the seas, but they were more advanced, usually with superior defenses. His guns could still do damage though. And he could always target the balloon, though it would take a lot of holes to let out enough gas to bring it down.

With the lights of the fort visible between the deck and the balloon, Ridge struck. He squeezed a trigger, and guns blasted, punching holes into the rear of the ship. Shouts arose on deck, just audible over the wind. Men raced for cannons at the back of the deck.

Tears burned his eyes, streaking back into his hair, and Ridge again lamented his missing goggles, but he didn't falter in his mission. He kept firing until those men were close to targeting him, then he pulled the nose up, hurling a few rounds into the balloon before rising above it. He slowed his speed as much as he could, putting that balloon between him and the deck so he would seem to disappear to those below. The flier would drop out of the sky if it tried to pace the airship, so he made tight circles above it. He couldn't see the Cofah any more than they could see him, but he hoped he had them consternated—and distracted.

A boom came from the fort, the first cannon firing from the walls. The ball sailed by a few meters to the side of the airship, but another cannon blasted on the heels of the first. Those on the airship deck should be busy now. Time for Ridge to do some more damage.

He guided the flier away from the balloon, rising again so it would be difficult for them to see, then swooping around to target the airship from the rear once more. That was the intent anyway. Something streaked out of the darkness, arrowing right at him.

A cannonball, that was his first thought, but that would have moved too quickly to see, and this was bigger anyway. Much bigger.

Ridge banked hard, his left wing tipping toward the sky. The object —no, the *creature*—blurred past him, missing by inches. Far more agile than he, it turned back toward the flier before he realized what he was dealing with. If he hadn't seen it before, he would have been mystified, but this wasn't the owl's first appearance.

Ridge swooped left and right, trying to make a difficult target for the creature, even as he distanced himself from the airship. He didn't want to be visible to their cannons while the owl distracted them. It screeched, raising all the hair on his body. Not only was the unearthly cry eerie… it was close. He glanced back, searching for it against the snowy peaks and the stars, but it was playing the same game he had with the airship. Only better. How could a mechanical contraption rival the grace of nature? Granted, some sorcerer had perverted the creature, but it still had all the agility of a bird of prey.

Something slammed into the top of the flier. Metal screeched in Ridge's ear. He shrank low in his seat, though he kept his hands on the controls. He twisted his neck and glimpsed spread wings and beady yellow eyes—the cursed thing had its talons locked around a bar on the frame. It wasn't more than three feet from Ridge. The cockpit was partially enclosed, but not fully. A giant owl could slip its talons in and slash his neck.

"So attack it first, eh?"

Easier said than done. Ridge banked hard, shaking the creature free. Then he accelerated, flying over the fort. He wasn't sure it was the best direction—with that idiot Nax in charge, Ridge might very well get shot down by his own people—but it was the only way that offered room to accelerate without having to climb over a mountain.

He pushed the engines to maximum power, hoping the owl couldn't match the speed. In a dive, a bird could drop as quickly as his flier, but surely wings couldn't flap as quickly as propellers rotated. He twisted his neck again, looking behind him. His own personal flier back home had mirrors, but he hadn't thought to install them here. Silly of him not to anticipate attacks by giant birds.

The owl was trailing him, its massive wings flapping, but falling behind. Ridge thought about trying to pull up right before he hit the side of the mountain ahead—hoping it would be so intent on chasing him that it smashed into the rocks—but he reminded himself that this wasn't another pilot-flown machine, this was a bird, something far more agile than his flier. Especially *this* flier.

Instead, when he had pulled ahead as much as he could without running into a mountain, he banked hard, turning back toward the owl. He lined up that dark silhouette, which was easier to see with the lights of the fort as a backdrop, and pounded ammunition into it. He remembered that their bullets hadn't done much in that canyon, but

the flier's big guns had more power. He hoped it was enough.

Ridge hit it. Many times. But the owl kept coming. It flew straight at him.

With visions of it tangling in his propeller, he swerved at the last moment. The creature clipped his wing, and the flier shimmied like a top spinning on an old cobblestone drive. The nose of the craft dipped, and the rocks and snow of the hillside below filled Ridge's vision. He forced himself to keep a loose grip on the controls, though his instincts cried for him to yank on them, to pull the flier up before he crashed. Instead he waited for the wings to find equilibrium again, then eased the nose up. He swooped so low to the ground that snow sprayed in his wake, but he started climbing once more. An intermittent kerchunk-clink joined the engine's regular noise.

"A little longer," he murmured to it. "Hold out a little longer."

He searched all around for the owl, hoping he had injured it enough that it couldn't continue to fly, but not daring to believe that was the case. Nothing streaked out of the sky at him. Maybe, just maybe, luck had favored him.

Before he could think to celebrate, he spotted the Cofah hovering directly over the fort. Cannonballs blasted upward at the wooden hull, but impossibly they bounced off. The sky burned beneath the airship, lit up like an inferno as it spat a hailstorm of flames down onto the courtyard and walls.

"What the—" Ridge shook his head. Whatever weapon that was, he couldn't identify it. All he knew was that his people were in trouble.

Chapter 14

Sardelle crept down the hallway toward the front door of the prison building. She had left the young guard slumped on the floor outside her cell, snoozing in a deep slumber. It would take a cannon going off in his ear to wake him. Making him drowsy had taken time, but it had been a better alternative than giving him a rash.

Missing Jaxi's usual commentary on the subject, Sardelle cracked open the door to peer into the courtyard. It was surprisingly empty.

A cannon boomed from atop the wall, and she had her answer as to why. The fort was under attack.

Usually, she wouldn't root for that, but it gave her the opportunity she needed. She didn't have to throw illusions around or camouflage herself to trot unnoticed to the headquarters building. She did falter for a moment when she realized the dragon flier wasn't perched near the creek as it had been for days. A hasty sweep of the fort revealed that Ridge wasn't around either. The buzz of a flier's propellers drifted on the breeze, and she spotted the craft near the mountains south of the fort, a dark shadow against the snowy peaks. At first, she couldn't guess why he was there when the airship was floating in from the north. Then she spotted a second shadow. That shaman's overgrown owl.

Sardelle chomped on her lip, torn between going for her sword and trying to help Ridge from there. Seeing a soldier jogging down the stairs from the wall and turning in her direction made up her mind. He was heading toward the armory, but he would see her if she didn't duck inside. She pushed through the door, vowing to return shortly. With Jaxi's help, she would be able to do more damage, maybe even stop that shaman, not just his pet. She prayed Ridge could survive against the owl for a few minutes on his own.

Sardelle jogged straight up to Ridge's—now the general's—office without seeing anyone. It was so easy that she paused with her hand on the knob, half suspecting a trap. No, she didn't believe Ridge would do that to her. It was more that she worried she would open the door and find Jaxi had been moved. What if the general, knowing the soulblade's value, had taken it with him when he ran out to command

the fort defense?

"Look first *before* worrying," Sardelle grumbled, and tried to turn the knob. It was locked. Well, someone must have had her in mind.

An explosion sounded. It hadn't come from the cannons on the wall but from somewhere above, and she sensed the approach of dozens of people—and one shaman. He wasn't talking to her this time. Maybe he was up to something more important. Like planning how to raze the fortress, destroy her, and take Jaxi.

"Not happening."

Another boom rang out. The floor quaked beneath her feet, and for a moment, she clutched her chest, remembering the disaster in the tunnels below. Something clanked to the floor on the other side of the door. The sword case? That brought her back to the moment, filled her with urgency.

Sardelle's first thought had been to carefully disable the lock, but with the Cofah floating ever closer, she simply blasted the hinges off the door. Let the general scratch his head over that later.

The office hadn't changed much, and she spotted the out-of-place iron box on top of a bookcase right away. Several books and a filing cabinet drawer had been dumped to the floor from the quakes, but the long box remained in place. When she climbed on the desk to reach it, it reminded her of the day she had walked in on Ridge cleaning, and another twinge of worry for him ran through her. She tugged the box down, hardly caring that it was too heavy for her. She let it clank to the floor, jumped down, and tried to tug it open. Of course it was locked. She hissed in frustration at all the delays and tore off another set of hinges. The general wouldn't know if a sorceress or a tornado had swept into his office.

Sardelle yanked open the lid on the box.

It's about time.

She sank to her knees on the floor in relief. *After three hundred years of being trapped, that half hour shouldn't have fazed you.*

It was well over an hour, thank you.

There was a piece of paper tied around the blade. Sardelle yanked it free, opened it, and found an address. She snorted. Nax had the blade all ready to ship off to some military research facility, did he?

Cannons boomed outside the window. Reminded that Ridge and the rest of the fort were in trouble, Sardelle stuffed the paper in her pocket, grabbed the soulblade, and raced back into the hallway. At the bottom of the stairs, she thrust open the front door and almost ran into a rain of fire.

The air sizzled with heat—and magic. Screams of pain erupted on the ramparts.

"Cover," someone cried, "find cover!"

"Stay where you are, soldier!" That was General Nax. Bastard.

Sardelle backed into the doorway to give herself a moment to think. A shield. That was what they needed. Yes.

Around the whole fort?

It has to be. Sardelle took a deep breath and concentrated. She created a translucent dome, so subtle that the fiery rain continued through it at first, slowed down but not extinguished. Gradually, she added more energy until the burning pellets bounced off instead of falling through.

Someone cheered from the wall. She doubted the soldier had any idea what was going on, other than the fact that fire wasn't falling onto his head, but Sardelle let herself feel bolstered—*appreciated*—nonetheless.

They're going to want to shoot through your shield. In fact, they're about to try now.

Sardelle grimaced. Ricocheting cannonballs would not be good. *Let me see if I can tinker with it and—*

I'll handle it. You look for a way to deal with the shaman. He'll know right where we are now.

Understood.

She would have preferred to search for Ridge and see how he was doing with that owl, but the shaman had to be the priority.

He found her first. With a mental attack. Something like a harpoon blasted into her mind. Pressure erupted from it, until her eyeballs felt like they would burst from her head. Sardelle dropped to a knee, pressing her fist into the cold earth for support. If not for Jaxi, the shield would have fallen. For a moment, all Sardelle could focus on was building her own shield, one around herself, one that could repel his attack. She gathered the strength to thrust him away, to return the assault, but paused before deploying it.

What if she played dead? Lured him down? She couldn't physically touch him as long as he was up on that ship, but if he came down, looking for Jaxi…

Yes, use me as bait. We invaluable swords love that.

Sardelle's head was still throbbing—if she fought him off completely, he would get a feel for how much power she had, and he wouldn't come down—but she managed a quick response. *Who told you that you were invaluable?*

All of the truly wise people who have known me. Go on. Crumple to the ground with theatrical flair. I won't give you away.

Sardelle opted for slumping against the doorjamb. She quieted her mind, as if she were unconscious. The attack continued to batter at her, but she gritted her teeth and endured it. If this didn't work in the next few seconds, though, she was going to get angry and start looking

for ways to rip *his* hinges off, whether he was a hundred meters above her or not.

The flames have stopped, Jaxi reported. *Should I drop the shield?*

Yes, he'll be distracted with me for the moment. She hoped. Besides, to further the illusion, she had to stop doing anything that showed off her power. *Just be prepared to raise it again.*

Got it.

Then the shaman was probing her, the mental equivalent of checking her pulse at her throat. Neither she nor Jaxi thought a word lest he feel it. The sensation of letting him investigate without putting up defensive shields was like having ants crawling all over her skin, but she endured it, as she had the pain.

Eventually, he withdrew. The cannons were firing again—both from the fort and the ship—but Sardelle and the shaman had other concerns.

He's coming.

Flying? Sardelle had never heard of a sorcerer who could, at least not without the help of some sort of apparatus. *Or did someone drop a rope?* Was the airship close enough for that? Surely the soldiers would object…

He's bringing down a hot air balloon. Must be the airship equivalent of a lifeboat.

Are our soldiers attacking it?

Jaxi paused. *Yes, but the shaman is shielding it, just as you did, and he's protecting the airship, too, though it looks like your flying friend did some damage before the shaman was prepared.*

Ridge? Good. Sardelle felt a swell of pride for him. Though it quickly turned to worry. Would the shaman sense it if she stretched out, trying to locate him?

Stay still. He's landed. And he's walking this way.

Sardelle cracked an eyelid. She was surprised there weren't any soldiers racing down from the walls to attack the shaman.

Ah, but he wasn't alone. The bronze-skinned man who strode toward her in a cloak of black fur, his long white hair startling in contrast, was surrounded by no less than two dozen other men, shaven-headed Cofah warriors wielding short-swords and long double-barreled firearms that they shot one-handed from their hips. The soldiers inside the fort *were* shooting at them, but the shaman was shielding them.

Jaxi's hilt grew warm, ready for a fight. *You drew them in. Do you have a plan? I don't think he'll be bothered by a rash.*

Sardelle's plan had been to throw everything she had at the shaman and hope to take him by surprise, but if she could force his shield down, that might be enough. A sorcerer was as susceptible to bullets

as the next person.

The Cofah warriors smiled as bullets bounced away from them and grew confident enough to launch their own attacks. They started shooting at the men on the walls. The shaman raised a hand toward the mountainside, and the doors Ridge had ordered built over the tram shafts flew open amongst squeals of metal.

Sardelle cursed at herself. Inviting the bastard down hadn't been a good idea after all. If all those miners streamed out and started attacking their captors…

Time for her own attack. The shaman was less than ten meters away. Sardelle summoned her energy and blasted it at him, targeting his mind, just as he had done to her. She could only hope it was enough.

. . . . .

At first, Ridge had the airship in sight as he streaked across the sky, the wind tearing his eyes and scraping his cheeks raw. Then he saw the smaller balloon on the ground inside the fort, the bald Cofah troops striding across the courtyard in their crimson uniforms and cloaks. One distinctive white-haired figure at the center of their formation stood out. Ridge didn't know who he was—or why his own people weren't shooting those intruders—but had a feeling he was responsible for that fire that had been raining from the sky. Another sorcerer.

"Would have been nice if headquarters had had a clue about this ship," he muttered, tipping the flier's nose down to dive for that formation.

He fired, but realized the problem immediately. The bullets bounced off before striking the men. He adjusted his targeting, thinking he would blast a few holes in the ground next to the Cofah and see how well their invisible shielding protected them from heaving earth at their feet, but his finger froze on the trigger. Someone was crumpled on the ground in the doorway of the admin building. Sardelle.

Ridge swallowed—had she been shot retrieving that sword? Or had the shaman done something to her?

Necessity made him pull up, and she disappeared from his sight. Rage and fear formed a lump in his throat, and he almost missed the significance of a blast from overhead, a cannon firing. At him. It blazed past the cockpit, missing his wing by inches.

Ridge turned away from the fort, knowing he was all-too-well-lit by the fire and lanterns below. He aimed for high sky, though he kept the airship in the corner of his eye. If their sorcerer protector was on the ground… maybe they would be more vulnerable to attack now. He

had already done *some* damage. If he could bring the ship down, the Cofah would be stranded, sorcerer or not. As much as he wanted to tear into the fort to protect Sardelle, he never should have fired into the courtyard to start with. He risked hitting his own men that way. This was the more logical attack.

"I hate logic sometimes," Ridge said, the wind stealing his words. Not that there was anyone there to hear them.

Once he was above the airship again, and they couldn't target him so easily, he veered in close. He strafed the oblong balloon, delivering dozens of small holes. With luck, the bullets might chew up the frame inside too. Unfortunately, those little holes wouldn't bring the craft down anytime soon.

Something streaked out of the dark sky and slammed into the front of the cockpit. He jerked back. The owl, he realized at the same moment as its unworldly shriek blasted his ears.

He banked hard, trying to hurl it off the flier. If not for his harness, he might have hurled *himself* out. The cursed magical bird hung on, its wings beating around the cockpit, keeping Ridge from seeing anything clearly. He glimpsed the balloon of the airship, approaching quickly. He tried to pull up, but that giant owl was either pushing down on the nose somehow or it weighed as much as another person.

Something rolled against Ridge's foot as he twisted and turned, trying to buck the owl free.

"What now?" he growled.

Then he remembered Bosmont's comment. Since he needed to duck a slashing talon anyway, he bent down and patted around his feet. He grasped something that felt like a cannonball. That didn't make any sense. He slapped at the switch that uncovered the crystal in the back, and light blazed forth.

The owl squawked and let go, flapping off to the side of the flier.

"Ten layers of hell, if I'd known it hated light, I would have tried that first." Ridge didn't give a whit that the glowing crystal would make him an easier target for the airship, not if it kept that demon bird away. He needed to see what his engineer had given him too. It was lighter than a cannonball, even if it had the same shape, and a wick stuck out of the top.

"Not a wick, idiot, a fuse." Ridge laughed. Bosmont had made him some bombs.

His first thought was that a bomb dropped onto the top of that balloon would definitely rip a big enough hole to bring the airship down. But the owl veered in again, its huge wings blotting out the stars. The light of the crystal might have startled it, but it had recovered.

"Let's see how he likes bombs."

Keeping one hand on the controls, Ridge unfastened the lid of the storage box next to his seat, and fished out the flashlamp used for lighting emergency flares. He thumbed the trigger on the side, and flint snapped against steel, producing a tiny flame. He jammed the bomb between his legs to hold it and hoped Bosmont knew what he was doing and that it wouldn't go off prematurely. He waited before lighting it, knowing it would take a lot of luck to catch that owl. From the length of the fuse, he judged he would have about four seconds before the bomb exploded.

The creature had disappeared for the moment. Maybe it knew what he intended. Ridge craned his neck in all directions and up, knowing death often came from above in aerial fights, and he was rewarded. He spotted the owl diving down at him from above, plummeting for a kill.

Ridge lit the fuse, grabbed the bomb, then waited, counting. The flier shimmied and jerked, needing two hands on the controls, especially now that it had taken damage.

"Just give me one more second, girl," he muttered.

He threw the bomb at the owl, as it extended its talons to grip the top of the cockpit again, or maybe to grip the top of Ridge's head. Whatever its intent, having a metal ball hurled at its face altered its plan. Ridge expected the bomb to strike it and bounce off—he was hoping he had timed it so it would explode before it bounced far—but the owl reacted by snapping its beak down. It caught the bomb in its mouth.

Ridge fought the urge to gape in surprise, instead taking the flier down, knowing he had to put distance between himself and that bomb before—

It erupted with a great flash of orange and yellow, and with a boom that rivaled that of the cannons firing below. The shock made the flier buck, but Ridge got away before any shrapnel hit him. For a moment, feathers filled the sky, as if a pillow had exploded.

Ridge blew out a relieved breath but went straight to his next target. The airship. He felt around with his foot. Hadn't Bosmont said he had packed a couple of those little gifts? To keep Ridge warm? Yes, there was another. He fished it out, setting it in his lap again. That would never cease to make him nervous, but nobody had thought to mount a bomb holder in the cockpit.

The flier fought him, and he didn't know how many more runs he would have, but he angled it skyward again. If he could take out the airship, surely the men below could do the rest. Sorcerer or not.

As he climbed, Ridge peered into the fort, wondering about Sardelle, wondering if…

This time, he did let his mouth fall open in a gape. Sardelle was on

her feet in the middle of the courtyard, her sword blazing with an intense golden light that had to be hurting the eyes of anyone nearby. Except for that white-haired man in the furs… He was facing her, his hand outstretched, some sort of red mist pouring from his fingers. Ridge had no idea what was going on—or who was winning—and as much as he wanted to help her, he was glad to be far above. He would much rather deal with the airship than magic.

Around Sardelle and the enemy sorcerer, Cofah warriors were engaged with the fort defenders in close combat. Ridge's people had numbers and *ought* to have the advantage, but someone had opened the mine doors, and miners were streaming out, pickaxes in hand. There was no telling which side of the fray they would join. With that balloon on the ground, they would have to see an escape opportunity. They might simply brain anyone they crossed and sprint for freedom.

Ridge jerked his gaze from the courtyard and touched the bomb in his lap. He had to finish his part before worrying about the chaos below.

. . . . .

Sardelle advanced on the shaman, Jaxi glowing like a sun in her hand. She had surprised him with her initial attack, and his defenses had fallen, allowing the bullets to reach the Cofah warriors, but he had recovered enough to brick off his mind. That was fine. She had no problem stopping the man with her sword. So long as the Cofah didn't distract her overly much.

They were clearly acting as the shaman's bodyguards, whereas the soldiers on the wall… would be as happy to shoot her as to shoot him.

A Cofah warrior aimed his firearm at her. When it blasted, Jaxi blazed, incinerating what turned out to be sprayed shot rather than a bullet. Fortunately, the rest of the Cofah were focused on shooting back at those shooting from the wall. With their shielding gone, they had the low ground. Some had already run to take cover behind buildings.

The shaman tried another mental attack, similar to the one he had originally launched. He wasn't the only one who had shored up his brain's defenses. The assault broke around Sardelle, like water passing a boulder in a stream.

She smiled at him and walked closer. Less than ten meters separated them. If he was armed, his weapons lay under that fur cloak. She eyed it. The wombat fur or whatever it was looked coarse and dry. She waved her hand, trying to ignite it. For a moment, smoke wafted up all around the shaman, but he squelched the attack.

He sneered at her, raising his hand, and tendrils of red mist floated toward her. Sardelle kept walking, not certain what that mist was—

much of his magic was foreign to her, something from a distant continent—but trusted Jaxi's power to destroy it. For herself, she raised the soulblade over her shoulder, preparing for a physical attack.

Jaxi pulled the red mist toward her. It wrapped around the blade, then light flashed and it was gone, incinerated like the bullets.

The shaman's eyes grew round as he stared at her—at the sword. At that moment, he knew he was outmatched.

It's not too late, he spoke into her mind. *Forget these talentless apes. They're not worth wasting your power on. Come with me. I'll give you more than they ever could*.

Is this going to be another offer to breed? Sardelle didn't bother to hide her disgust this time. He should have offered again to take her to the other sorcerers in the world. That would have tempted her more. Not enough to lower her sword and stop advancing on him, but more.

Do you not want children? Children with power to rival your own?

If I choose to have children, I want them to have two parents that love them, and each other.

That could come in time. With his thoughts, he sent an image of them together, locked in a lovers' embrace.

Sardelle curled her lip. The shaman was backing away, even as she advanced. She increased her pace. Another five meters, and she would reach him. As she pressed forward, Jaxi cut down bullets that came close—one burst into flames a foot from her eyes. That had originated on the wall, not from a Cofah shotgun. It wasn't the first. No matter what the outcome of this battle, she needed to leave as soon as her confrontation was over.

You see them? The shaman flung a hand toward the soldiers on the wall. *They would strike you down as swiftly as they would me. To defend them is utter foolishness. You are not worthy of a soulblade.*

Your courting words could use some work. Three meters.

The shaman crouched like a tiger, as if he meant to launch a physical attack at her. Instead he threw up both hands, hurling a tidal wave of energy. Again she let it deflect off her mental shield, and it barely stirred her hair. Behind her, windows shattered and doors flew open. A soldier was knocked off the wall and cried out in pain.

Sardelle leapt forward, slashing at the shaman's neck with her blade. He scrambled backward, but his heel caught on slick ground. He flailed trying to catch himself. Sardelle lunged after him before he could recover, reminding herself that, weapon or not, he was *not* a helpless unarmed opponent. He had come to destroy this fort—and to steal Jaxi. She finished him with a stab to the heart.

Sardelle turned three hundred and sixty degrees, checking for fresh attackers, prepared to defend herself. Rifles fired and metal clanged in all directions. Red and gray uniforms mixed, as men fought hand-to-

hand. The drab garb of prisoners was everywhere too. She had forgotten—the shaman had released the miners. A pickaxe slammed into a man's back. The victim wasn't, as she had feared, one of the fort's soldiers. It was a Cofah warrior. The prisoners were *helping* the soldiers, not hindering them.

Light flared in the night sky, and a cheer erupted. The rear of the airship had exploded, and shards of wood flew in every direction. Its balloon was already a misshapen, half-sunken mess. A single bronze dragon flier streaked out of the remains of the explosion, its frame gleaming with the reflection of the flames eating at the back of the airship. The wooden craft slumped in the sky, floating lower and lower, a crash inevitable.

Sardelle wished she could join in with the celebration and wait for Ridge, give him a kiss and a hug for his heroics, but she remembered those bullets all too well. As long as General Nax was in charge, she wouldn't receive fair treatment here.

With tears stinging her eyes, Sardelle checked the shaman one last time to ensure he was dead, then ran for the balloon craft that had delivered the Cofah. A single man waited in the large basket, the pilot doubtlessly. He was kneeling with only his eyes peeking over the rim. When he saw Sardelle coming, he leaned out and cut a line, then a second. They were attached to anchors holding the balloon down, and as soon as he severed them, the craft rose. Her run turned into a dead sprint. As dubious a craft as a hot air balloon might be for flying over the Ice Blades, it was all she had to escape these mountains.

She tossed her soulblade into the basket—that ought to alarm the pilot—then leaped, catching one of the dangling lines. Though she was weary from the battle, and no great athlete under any circumstances, she was motivated enough to find a way up. Half afraid the pilot would brain her, she rushed to claw her way over the edge and into the basket. Her sword was the only thing waiting inside.

I flared at him, and he jumped over the side.

You make an effective bully, Jaxi.

Thank you.

Sardelle pushed herself to her feet. In a minute, she would figure out how to work the controls. Sometime after that, she would contemplate her future and decide where she wanted the craft to take her. For now, she simply inhaled and exhaled the cold mountain air, feeling some of the tension ebb from her body as the fort grew farther and farther away.

The clank-thunk-kertwank of the dragon flier's engine drifted to her ear, and she found Ridge, the light of his power crystal illuminating him in the cockpit. He was flying toward the fort as she drifted in the other direction—by the sickly sound of that engine, it was doubtful his

craft would make it much farther—and too much distance separated them for words. He gave her a nod though and lifted a hand.

Her throat tight, Sardelle returned the gesture. Even if nobody else in that fort understood, he did.

Is that enough?

Sardelle wiped her eyes. *It has to be.*

Epilogue

There were either no fish, or his bait wasn't fooling them. Or he was too drunk to realize they had snickeringly made off with the bait an hour ago. He pondered whether fish snickered. And then he pondered whether he had the strength to get up from the chair, go inside the cabin, and make something to eat. It sounded like a lot of work. Much easier to lean back on the deck and enjoy the winter sun—if one could even call this weather "winter" in comparison to what the Ice Blades experienced. There wasn't any ice on the lake, and it felt more like autumn with the sun warming his skin.

On the other side of the water, a rooster crowed. There were only two other houses on the lake, part of the reason Ridge had bought it, but he wasn't sure he was enjoying the solitude at the moment. Given his mood, it might have been better to stay on base, to wait in the company of others for his squadron to return from their latest mission. But he hadn't given Sardelle his address there. He doubted she wanted anything to do with the military again.

Ridge picked at a sliver on the chair and wondered if he was being a fool. Did he truly expect her to show up? Was he even sure he *wanted* her to? After seeing… all that he had seen?

"You're sitting here, aren't you?" he mumbled.

What reason did she have to come though, now that she had her sword—her big glowing sorcerer-slaying sword? She didn't need any more favors from him.

"Drinking again?" came a soft voice from behind him.

Ridge nearly fell out of his chair. He *did* knock his fishing pole in the water as he jumped up and spun around, his mouth hanging open.

Sardelle stood at the head of the dock, wearing an elegant forest-green dress that hugged her slim waist and accented her curves far more nicely than the prison garb had. Her black hair hung lush and thick about her shoulders, and framed her face, including the spattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Somehow Ridge had never pictured sorceresses with freckles. He was glad for them though. They made her seem more… human. That and her archly raised eyebrow as she regarded his bottle.

"It's only the second time in a month," he said.

"Ah. I hope it's not because of… bad news again?" Her eyebrow lowered, and her expression grew earnest. Concerned. Maybe she thought he had gotten in trouble because of her.

"Nope. I was allowed to return to my squadron, and I got an award for my—" Ridge rolled his eyes as he quoted the rest, "—cunning, bravery, and initiative." Some idiot had threatened to promote him as well, but Ridge had squashed that snowball before it could roll downhill and turn into an avalanche. Generals didn't fly; generals commanded brigades—sometimes forts. He had no interest in enduring that again for a long time, if ever.

"Oh, I see," Sardelle said. "And that's why you're sitting out here and drinking, as if you've lost your oldest friend."

"The king and general of the armies were so happy to get that pile of crystals that they just had to award someone. With General Nax gone, I guess I got it by default. I'm not a believer in awards that are given without being earned. I didn't do a single intelligent thing while I was out there, and in the end I didn't do much more than blow up an owl. Someone *else* was paramount in defeating the Cofah." Ridge gave her a pointed look. It had all been in her hands all along.

"All I did was defeat their shaman. You blew up their airship. And that owl was *big*." Sardelle tilted her head. "When you say General Nax is gone, do you mean… ?"

"A little band of those Cofah sneaked up to the wall and got to him. I actually missed him when I got back down. There was no senior officer to foist all of the cleanup on."

"Regrettable," Sardelle murmured.

Ridge wondered if she would have kept flying away in that balloon if she had known the general had already been dead at that point. Probably. From what he had heard later, his own people had been shooting at her, right along with the other sorcerer.

"Sardelle, I… " Ridge stuffed his hands into his pockets and studied the dock boards at her feet. "I can't imagine it means much, but I want to apologize for the way you were treated there. I'd like to say things would have been different if you had told me the truth from the beginning, but… " He shrugged.

"I was afraid that if I did… Among other things, would you have spent the night with me in that cave if you had known?"

"Seven gods, no. I would have been afraid you would melt my dragon if I didn't please you adequately."

Sardelle snorted softly. "Just so we're clear, you're talking about… the little wooden figurine, right?"

Because a woman would find a man who called something else a dragon silly. Right, he knew that. "Of course."

“And the night in the library?” she asked.

“Oh, I was drunk enough then, that I might have risked your ire.”

“I see.”

Sardelle padded down the dock, soft green shoes that matched the dress whispering across the boards. He wondered when she had gone shopping—or how. Did she have money? Or had she simply snapped her fingers and willed the dress into existence? He swallowed as she drew nearer. He wasn’t afraid of her, but at the same time… he couldn’t pretend nothing had changed. She looked the same, but… it was hard not to see that aura that had enveloped her when she had held her sword aloft.

He glanced toward the yard and the cabin. “You didn’t bring your shiny sword?”

Sardelle stopped a couple of paces away, her head tilting. “I didn’t think I would need it here.”

“No… it’s generally safe, though the mosquitoes can be a powerful threat in the summer. Still, it doesn’t seem like something you should leave lying around for anyone to find. Or for a mountain to fall on top of.”

“I rode a horse here.” She waved to the trees by the road. “Jaxi—my sword—and a pack are on it, but I wasn’t sure if I should… presume to drop my things on your porch. I wasn’t even sure this would be your porch. That address… at first, I thought it was some research facility the general had meant to ship my sword to.”

“No,” Ridge whispered, distracted by the thought that she wanted to drop her things on his porch.

“Then by the time I got that balloon over the mountains and down to civilization, and figured out what city that address was in, I was a little concerned I might find you here with… someone else.”

“Who else would there be?”

“I don’t know. Given how quickly the general’s daughter—I presume she’s still alive?—grew infatuated with you, I gather you don’t have much trouble finding female company.”

“Oh.” Ridge decided not to mention that he had ridden home with Vespa, who had tried to convince him to console her physically over the loss of her father. “She was actually infatuated before she came, I gathered later, and more by my reputation than by actually knowing me. Once women get to know me, they often flee the other way.” Not exactly true. The incompatibility issues didn’t usually arise until they tried living together, and he was off for months at a time, trying to get himself killed—their words, not his—and leaving them alone at home to worry.

“Ridge, are you lying to me?”

“Maybe a little. I thought it was my turn.” He smiled and crossed

the last few feet between them, sensing that she wanted that from him, and took her hands. “If you can tolerate my mendacious ways, maybe you could stay a while, see if you find the knowing more appealing than others have.”

She leaned against his chest, their hands still clasped. “I’d like that.”

“Good,” he whispered, locking eyes with her. His heart was beating as fast as a propeller. He felt like a teenager filled with that mix of exhilaration and terror as he mustered the courage to kiss her. But as soon as their lips touched, there was a sense of the familiar… and the right.

THE END

Deathmaker

When Lieutenant Caslin Ahn joined Wolf Squadron, she was prepared for the reality that she might one day be killed in the line of duty. She was less prepared for being shot down, assumed dead by her own people, and dragged off to the Cofah Empire as a prisoner of war. As if being thrust into a dungeon and interrogated wasn't bad enough, the sadistic commandant decides to give her a cellmate: the notorious pirate Deathmaker. Given the crimes he's committed against Iskandia, Cas owes it to her people to try and kill him.

Part warrior and part scientist, Tolemek "Deathmaker" Targoson has not only slain thousands with his deadly concoctions, but he has a special loathing for Iskandian pilots. It was Ahn's commander, Colonel Zirkander, who ruined his military career, forcing him to leave his country in shame and join a pirate organization. Years later, he uses his dreadful reputation like a shield to keep people away; all he wants is to be left alone to work in his laboratory. But when fate lands him in a cell with Zirkander's protégé, he sees a chance for revenge. Why kill the lieutenant when he can use her to get to his old nemesis?

There's just one problem: it's hard to plot against your enemies when you're in prison with them. Cas and Tolemek will have to work together if they hope to escape the Cofah dungeon. In the process, they may find that neither is what the other expects, and that they have far greater problems to worry about than ensnaring each other...

Chapter 1

Cas didn't like her new cell. After having spent two weeks jammed into a dark locker on a Cofah warship, the space so confining that she couldn't stand up or stretch out straight, she probably should have considered this an improvement. But she wasn't one of those irritatingly cheerful optimists. She hadn't liked the last cell, and she didn't like this one either. The window might let in the ocean breeze, but it was too small to climb through, not to mention barricaded with iron bars. The cries of parrots and the yowls of monkeys beyond it were a reminder that she was in a strange land, far from home, without hope of rescue.

Heavy footsteps and the jangle of weapons sounded in the hallway.

Cas bared her teeth, hoping the guards would only stroll past on their way to attend to another prisoner. It had been scarce minutes since her welcome-to-the-Dragon-Spit-prison-and-here's-a-thorough-beating-to-make-you-feel-at-home greeting. She was still lying on the floor and recovering, so she flinched at the idea of another round with those bone cudgels. For all her vows to stay strong, she had spent most of her first beating curled in a ball on the ground, clutching her gut, and doing her best not to whimper. Whimpering wasn't expressly forbidden in the "Survival, Evasion, and Recovery" chapter of the army field manual, but the line about the "inherent stoicism of soldiers" seemed to discourage it.

The footsteps stopped, and the door opened. Yellow lantern light spilled in from the hallway, making Cas realize that twilight had fallen outside. Not that the time of day mattered much.

A guard scurried inside carrying a stool. He set it down, the legs scraping against the hard sandstone floor, then he stood beside the door. Thanks to the shaven head, scarred face, and broad shoulders, he would have been ominous and forbidding even without the bone cudgel and short sword secured on either hip and the shotgun gripped in his hands.

Another shaven-headed man walked in, this one older and wearing a tiger fur cloak over his brown uniform. It didn't look particularly climate-appropriate. The man wasn't carrying any visible weapons,

but Cas assumed he was in charge. If the Cofah military was anything like her own, only important people got to tinker with the dress code. For a moment, she thought of her own commander, Colonel Ridge Zirkander, and the way his non-regulation cap was always tilted at a rakish angle, but she hurried to push the image away, lest tears form in her eyes. She could be tough while they questioned her, but only as long as she didn't let herself think of comrades—*friends*—back home... and whether she would ever see them again.

"Lieutenant Caslin 'Raptor' Ahn," High Lord Cloak said, settling on the stool. "Wolf Squadron."

Cas searched for something cocky to say, something to show that she wasn't intimidated by him or this situation—Zirkander would have had a witty riposte for this statement of the obvious—but all she got out was a muffled, "Yeah?" Her lips were split and swollen from the beating. Even that single syllable hurt.

"Raptor?" Cloak made a point of eyeing her up and down, or rather, since she was on the floor, forward and back. Then he smirked. "Truly?"

Cas would have liked to stand up and tower threateningly over him, but she had to wear her thick-soled combat boots to brush the five-foot-two mark on a measuring wall. So far, she hadn't managed to tower over anyone older than ten. It would have hurt too much to climb to her feet anyway.

"I didn't give myself the nickname," she grumbled. Not that she minded it; *most* of the squadron had embarrassing nicknames, especially the other young lieutenants. Pimples and Snuggles came to mind.

"Well, *Raptor*, our latest intelligence confirms that your people know your damaged flier sank during the skirmish in the Seven Tides Strait. They believe you're as dead as the other pilot."

The other pilot—Dash. Her eyes threatened to water again. She had seen the fire in Dash's cockpit, seen him burning, his skin charred, his mouth open in a scream of pain right before his flier plunged into the ocean. There was no chance he had swum away as she had, having survived by clinging onto a piece of a wing until someone pulled her out of the water hours later. The *wrong* someone.

Cloak leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped as he regarded her. "That means nobody's coming for you."

A monkey howled in the distance. Cas wouldn't have minded making a similar screech. She muttered a, "No kidding," instead. Maybe she shouldn't be saying anything. But if she responded to him, she might get a scrap or two of information in return. Though she wasn't sure how she could manage it at the moment; escape had to be her priority. That *was* specifically mentioned in the field manual.

Escaping and reporting back, that was her duty.

"That means we can keep you here as long as we need to." Cloak smiled. Someone who found joy in his job. What a soul to be treasured.

"Oh, good," Cas said. "I was afraid I wouldn't get to thoroughly appreciate this hot, humid-as-spit climate before getting shipped somewhere else."

"We'll interrogate you, of course," the man continued, as if she hadn't spoken. Maybe he was used to talking to himself. "I doubt you know much. What are you, a year out of the academy?"

A year and three months, thank you, but she kept the thought to herself. No need to start giving away intel before they began the interrogation; no matter that they already seemed to know more about her than she would like.

"But you *are* Wolf Squadron," Cloak went on. "If you've served under Zirkander for a year, my emperor will want whatever information you can supply on him."

Cas had been beyond proud when she had been selected for Wolf Squadron straight out of the academy—she had done her best to live up to the prestigious unit's reputation—and she would never regret that choice. But, for the first time, she realized her position might not serve her well. Everything that made her commander a lauded hero in Iskandia would make him a loathed enemy here.

"Zirkander?" she asked, licking her lips—odd how dry her mouth had suddenly grown, humid air notwithstanding. "His favorite color is green; his favorite meal is pot roast; he prefers beer to straight spirits; and, when winter comes, he'll throw a snowball at anyone, even officers who outrank him. If that's enough intel, you can leave my cell door open, and I'll be happy to show myself out."

Neither the guard nor Cloak seemed to find her sarcasm amusing. Given how much saying all that had made her mouth hurt, she shouldn't have bothered.

Cloak pulled a dagger out of a sheath that his furry garment had hidden. Cas tried to draw back, or at least manage a sitting position, but he moved quickly for an old prison commander. The blade came up beneath her chin, the sharp point digging into tender flesh. She froze, but that didn't keep a drop of warm blood from welling and dripping down her throat.

"I've sent a communication to the emperor," Cloak said. "It's possible he'll simply want to hurt Zirkander by sending him your head. As a sign of his failure."

Cas lifted her chin, part defiance, and part an attempt to put some air between her and that blade. "The colonel wasn't even in command of the squadron at Seven Tides. *He* didn't fail at anything." Although

Cas couldn't help but feel that *she* had failed. Due to her inability to dissuade a Cofah diplomat from groping her, the colonel had stepped in and punched the man, a move which had resulted in disciplinary action. It was Cas's fault the colonel hadn't been flying with the squadron that day. The man who had taken over, Major Pennith, was a good officer, but Zirkander never would have accepted the mission, one that ultimately cost the squadron four fliers and Dash's life. The colonel would have known the odds were too poor and would have pushed back against the general, maybe even the king, or he would have changed the situation, changed the odds somehow. As he always did. As Cas should have done in facing that diplomat. She shouldn't have needed rescuing. Her father would have been embarrassed for her. Rightfully so.

"Yes," Cloak purred, "we've heard that he hasn't been flying of late. Care to tell me *where* he's been?"

"Not that I would tell you anyway, but I have no idea. You're right that lieutenants fresh out of the academy don't get told much by generals and colonels."

Zirkander had barely had time for more than a goodbye wave to all of them before disappearing to who knew where. Reassigned, he had said, his face almost ashen. Cas had never seen that expression on him before, and it had alarmed her. But he'd told them he couldn't say more, simply giving everyone pats on the back and encouraging words before collecting his lucky charm from his flier and walking out of the hangar.

"You're sure you're not anyone's bedroom confidant? You're young and pretty enough. Under the blood." Cloak traced her jaw with his dagger, his dark eyes growing thoughtful.

For a moment, rage replaced fear, and Cas spat at his face. It was stupid, but it felt good. She found the strength to pull away from him, too, not that she could go far. All he would have to do was get off that stool. If he couldn't corner her on his own, the guards surely would.

Cloak snorted and wiped his face. "It's unfortunate there are rules against jailers raping prisoners. If the Iskandians are stupid enough to put women in their military, they're asking for it, after all. Besides, after all of our men your flier squads have brought down—*killed*—you deserve it." He looked at the soldier standing next to the door.

Cas gripped the sandstone bench lining one cell wall, pushing herself into a standing position, bruises and pain notwithstanding. Rules were good, but if Cloak wanted to break them, she meant to face him on her feet.

"If you want me to shut the door and see nothing, I will, sir," the guard said.

Loyal to his commander, was he? How sweet.

Cloak's thoughtful expression returned to her. There was far too much consideration on his face.

Cas dug through her mind, looking for a way out of this mess. To distract them, if nothing else, and make them forget about her for the night. "Since you seem to know quite a bit about me, you might have heard of my father. He wouldn't have been so quick to dismiss me as dead when he heard the news. He could be over here, hunting for me already."

"Yes, I've heard of your father, and my research tells me that he hasn't spoken to you in three years. I understand he didn't approve of your decision to join the army and serve the king instead of going into the family business."

Cas swallowed, disturbed by how much intelligence the Cofah had on specific Iskandian personnel. They couldn't know this much about every soldier in the army, could they? Maybe the flier pilots had been singled out because they were particularly irksome.

"I doubt he'll be looking for you," Cloak finished. "No, you'll stay here with us for a while. We'll break you and get every iota we can out of you while waiting for word from the emperor."

Break you. That did not sound promising.

More footsteps sounded in the hallway.

"Any chance that's dinner?" Cas asked, hoping this chat was over. "They didn't feed me regularly on that glorified tug. As you can see, I'm getting a little waifish."

"You missed dinner. I'll be sure to tell Captain Trivolt that you called his warship a tug though. I'm sure that will make him more hospitable to the next prisoner he captures."

A guard jogged into the cell and whispered something into Cloak's ear. Cas took the opportunity to move farther from him and his dagger. She put her back to the window wall, her canvas prison smock little insulation from the cool, coarse stone against her shoulder blades. Coarse or not, she liked having it behind her and putting as much distance between her and the men as she could.

"Yes, I'd heard about his capture," Cloak said when his man straightened. "An even more intriguing prisoner. Yes, I'll question him immediately."

As he stood up, Cas allowed herself a hint of relief. Good, someone else for the commander to harass.

Cloak paused before walking out the door though. He looked thoughtfully back at her, his hand on the door jamb. Then he threw back his head and laughed, a deep hollow laugh that reminded her of the big bell clanging in Sky Tower back home.

"Sir?" the new guard asked. Judging by the way his mouth dropped open, his commander didn't laugh like this often.

Oh, good, that meant he had come up with something special. Cas prayed it had nothing to do with her. Would the seven gods hear her prayers over here in enemy territory? Or did they think her dead too?

"Bring him here, Corporal," Cloak said, his lips still stretched with mirth. Mirth Cas couldn't help but find alarming, especially when he turned that smile toward her. "I believe we'll save space by having our two new prisoners share a cell."

The guard's brow wrinkled. "But there are plenty of empty cells, sir."

"Ah, but nobody hates Zirkander and Wolf Squadron more than the Deathmaker."

Cas stared for a stunned moment as the words sank in. Deathmaker. Cas closed her eyes. She would have liked to scoff at the overly dramatic name—pirates couldn't ever call themselves Thon or Jed, could they?—but she had been to Tanglewood Peninsula, seen the memorial there, the graves. Six years earlier, the entire village—every man, woman, and child—had been slain by a horrible biological agent that melted their lungs and other organs, killing them from the inside out. There was nothing about the Deathmaker that should make one scoff. The evil scientist belonged to the Roaming Curse, one of the biggest pirate outfits flying the Targenian Sea. Wolf Squadron had battled with them just that past summer, taking back a pair of dragonflier energy sources the pirates had stolen during a raid. Zirkander hadn't been lenient, and Cas had been along on that mission. She had helped bring down their flagship. She shouldn't be surprised that Deathmaker had gotten away. He was one of the few pirates who had a reputation even more horrendous than that of his bloodthirsty leader, Captain Slaughter.

But what would he be doing *here*? Why would a nefarious pirate scientist be roaming about where he could be captured?

"But won't he kill her, sir?" the guard asked after scratching his head a few times.

"Possibly. Though I'm hoping he'll want to prolong her torment a bit." Cloak turned his unfriendly smile back onto Cas. "The rules say nothing about what prisoners may and may not do to each other." Cloak laughed again. He even wiped tears from his eyes. What a dung flinger. "If nothing else, she'll be less lippy in the morning, I'm sure."

"Yes, sir. I'll get him."

Cas stared at the floor, trying hard not to feel defeated... and failing.

Deathmaker. Fate was hating her this month. When she had gone to flight school and joined Wolf Squadron, she had known she would make enemies. Even if Iskandia merely defended its homeland and rarely looked for trouble beyond its borders, the Cofah believed her

people were rebels who should be reconquered. Hundreds of years may have passed since her ancestors had killed their externally imposed rulers and cast the Cofah off their continent, but the empire had a long memory. The Cofah had never stopped wanting Iskandia, and they would always believe themselves the righteous ones. When Cas had started shooting down their dirigibles and attacking their ocean warships, it had been inevitable that she would become a target herself.

Well, she didn't have to be an easy target.

Cloak and the new guard had gone.

Cas eyed the remaining guard. He was watching her right back, his shotgun aimed in her direction. Surprising him and escaping would be difficult, but the door was still open, and he was alone. This might be the only chance she got.

She subtly slid her hands along the wall behind her, hoping to find some crumbled piece of rock that she might hurl as a weapon. There were such chunks in the corners of the floor, but he would notice if she bent to pick one up. Oh, what she would give for the powers of the sorcerers of old, the ability to convince one of those noisy parrots out there to swoop through the window and claw this man's eyes out. She would have to settle for a more personal attack.

She shifted her weight and found one of those rocks with her toe. She nudged it away from the wall, thinking to kick it across the room. If she could distract him for a second, maybe she could wrestle that shotgun free from him. She might not be much more than a hundred pounds, and little more than salt and vinegar in a fight, but with a projectile weapon in hand, the odds should shift in her favor.

The footsteps returned in the hall. Out of time. She cursed under her breath.

The guard glanced toward the doorway. Cas kicked the rock.

It skittered across the room, banging him in the toe. Not much of an attack, but he looked down, and she leaped across the room. Her wounds protested the sudden movement, but her nerves flooded her limbs with fire to compensate. She grabbed the barrel of the rifle, trying to yank it free before he recovered.

He snorted. His eyes met hers, and there wasn't a glimmer of concern in them. He lunged at her, bowling her off her feet, and slammed her into the side wall so hard that it knocked her breath away. She tried to knee him, but he thrust her against the wall again, the back of her head thumping the stone this time. Blackness rimmed her vision, and dots of light floated through the air before her. She was vaguely aware of her feet dangling several inches off the ground.

"Women make pathetic soldiers," the guard said. "That you're here is a sign of how desperate the Iskandians are." He rammed her against

the wall again.

"That's enough, Sergeant," Cloak said from the hallway.

He had returned, along with more guards, a *lot* more guards. And another man.

Cas blinked, trying to clear her eyes. The man standing in the doorway, his hands shackled before him, appeared more warrior than scientist, with a hide vest leaving his muscular arms and part of his chest exposed. She had expected a crazy old man with spectacles or magnifying goggles and white hair sticking out in all directions. The figure in the doorway appeared to be about thirty, and his long black locks fell down his back in matted ropes. In contrast to the tangled hair, his mustache and goatee were trimmed, and his bronze Cofah skin was clean of grime, but nothing about the dark scowling eyes, the shark-tooth necklace, or the spiked leather wrist cuffs invited one to venture closer. Amazing that the guards had been able to get his shackles on over all that pointy metal.

They were watching him now, far more warily than they had watched her. No less than four pistols were aimed at the pirate.

"Deathmaker," Cloak said, extending a hand toward Cas, who was still pinned by the guard. "Allow me to introduce your new roommate."

The guard stepped back, letting Cas drop to the floor. She braced herself against the wall. Her heart was beating a couple thousand times a minute, and she needed the stone for support. So much for her grand escape attempt.

The pirate stared at her. Full darkness had fallen outside, and she doubted he could see much in the shadowy cell, but she didn't see how that helped her.

Out of some sense that she shouldn't let him know she feared him or that he had any power over her whatsoever, she said, "How come you got to keep your trendy pirate clothes, and they forced me to put on this potato sack?"

The prisoner turned his dark glower onto Cloak. If he found anything amusing about her question, it didn't show on his face.

"Ah, are introductions in order?" Cloak grabbed a lantern from the wall and hung it from a hook in the cell—Cas eased back into the shadows near the window again. "Deathmaker, this is the Iskandian, Lieutenant Ahn. From Wolf Squadron."

That got a reaction. The pirate's nostrils flared, and his head jerked back toward her, his hair whipping about his face.

Cloak waved to one of the guards. He stepped forward warily and unlocked the pirate's shackles. The metal fell away, clanging to the stone floor. The pirate lunged inside, springing toward Cas like a lion taking down its prey.

She could only take a step before her back smacked into the wall. She tried to duck and dodge away, but even in the darkness, he anticipated which way she would go and grabbed her. Much as the guard had done, he slammed her into the wall. Her already battered body betrayed her, and a gasp of pain slipped out. She wanted to fight, to spit curses if nothing else, but a calloused hand wrapped around her neck.

Cloak's dark chuckle came from the hallway, then the door thudded shut, leaving Cas along with the pirate. The hand about her neck tightened.

Chapter 2

Tolemek stood unmoving, his hand around the woman's throat, listening for the footsteps to recede in the hallway. There was a guard still standing outside, he was sure of it, but Commandant Searson was leaving, along with his hairy-knuckled team of brutes. He didn't know if they knew who he was—who he had been before becoming a pirate—but they had relished going over him with their cudgels either way.

While he waited, he noted the window, the breeze stirring the muggy air, and the way he could see the prison's rampart from the cell. That was good. If that kid came through, this might work out after all. Whoever his "roommate" was, this location was superior to the windowless holding cell he had originally been placed in.

He was about to let go of the woman—though there was a big part of him that wouldn't mind ridding the world of one of those cursed Iskandian fighter pilots, his attack had been a ruse to get the guards to leave him alone for the night—but she had recovered from the surprise of being grabbed. She twisted, trying to jam a knee into his groin. Hands clawed for his face. Fortunately, she wasn't very tall, and his longer arms kept him out of her range.

"Enough woman," he said and released her. "Leave me be, and I'll do the same for you."

He took a step back and waited in a fighting stance in case she came after him—she seemed livid enough to take on a pack of wolves barehanded—but she backed away, too, not stopping until her shoulder blades bumped the door.

The commandant had left the lantern hanging on the wall, and the light illuminated the side of her head. Her short hair hung in wisps about what was likely a cute, impish face when it wasn't bruised. She had endured at least one round with the guards and their cudgels too. Her swollen cheekbone, and the blood smearing her chin and upper lip made him feel guilty about manhandling her, show for the commandant or not. He reminded himself that she was an enemy. Her pale, freckled skin and red-blonde hair couldn't be anything except Iskandian. If Searson was to be believed, she was a *mortal* enemy. She scarcely looked old enough to be out of her basic military training

though. It was hard to imagine she had been on many flier runs. And just because Searson had said she was in Wolf Squadron didn't mean she was; the commandant had clearly wanted to manipulate Tolemek into something. Something designed to hurt her? Or a trap for him? If he murdered some other prisoner, they might have an excuse to shoot him without a tribunal.

He shook his head. He could muse upon it another time, after he escaped from this cell.

He propped a boot on the stone bench and tore off the hem of one of his trouser legs. The material wasn't bright, so he would have to trust that his helper out there was paying attention. He tied the strip around two iron bars in the window, making a cheerful bow.

Tolemek sat on the bench to wait, his back against the wall. He pulled up a leg and propped his arm on his knee. Nothing except the woman's eyes had moved. They were round and green. Innocent was the word that came to mind, and he wondered again at Searson's assertion. A fighter pilot? Truly? And if so, how had she gotten onto Colonel Zirkander's team? They didn't have any rookies flying with them. After last summer, Tolemek could say that for certain. He rubbed scars on his lower back that still itched—three bullets had been extracted from his flesh. The doctor had sworn he should have died and proclaimed his organs the toughest in the outfit. Another dubious accolade that, for good or ill, added to his reputation.

The girl—Ahn?—was considering the strip of cloth. She glanced at the lantern hanging beside her, and he wondered if she was thinking of burning his little flag. Well, she wouldn't have much luck if she tried.

"Got friends coming?" she asked softly, her Iskandian accent lilting, almost singsong to his Cofahre-born ears.

He didn't answer her. The last thing he needed was for her to alert the guard to the fact that he was trying to escape—*and* failing to menace her, as Searson had so clearly wanted. At least she had kept her voice low—it shouldn't be audible to the man standing in the hallway. He thought of keeping quiet, of saying nothing at all to her, but his curiosity got the best of him.

"You really a fighter pilot?"

It was more than curiosity that prompted the question; he wanted to know if he should let her go when he escaped, or make sure she stayed put in her cell. Though his loyalty to the Cofah had faded after his expulsion from the army, he still had family on the mainland. He worried from time to time that her people would one day shift their strategy from defensive to offensive. The size of the Iskandian army, and their population as a whole, might be laughable when compared to the empire's, but with those fliers, they could dance circles around

imperial dirigibles and easily engage in guerrilla attacks on the mainland.

This time, the woman was the one who didn't answer. Tolemek kept his amused snort to himself. There wouldn't be much of a conversation if neither of them answered questions. It was just as well. The silence suited him. He looked at the starry sky beyond the window, listening for quick feet on the rampart that might not belong to the guards. At least he tried to. The howler monkeys made it difficult. They ought to be sleeping by now, surely? Maybe some predator out there had them roused.

A soft clink sounded outside. A pebble thrown at the wall.

Tolemek sprang to his feet, at the window in an instant. As soon as his face was pressed against the bars, a small irregularly shaped object lofted over the outer wall and sailed in his direction. Right away, he knew the trajectory was off. It wasn't going to land anywhere near his window.

He knew it would be in vain, but he stuck his arm out anyway. He would only get one chance.

The small bundle struck the roof overhang twenty feet above. Tolemek stretched his arm out as far as he could, hoping luck would bless him, and he could catch it as it fell. The packet shifted, but caught on some crevice or drainpipe on the edge. He stared, disgusted. This was what he got for enlisting the aid of a twelve-year-old boy.

A whistle blew on the rampart, then two guns fired. Monkey howls blasted from the jungle. Tolemek didn't see the target, but the guards were aiming toward the rocks beneath the wall. He cursed and hoped the boy had been able to scramble away quickly or knew how to swim and had dived for the deep water beyond the rocks. The kid had known the risk of helping him, but he had volunteered anyway, his eyes gleaming at the promise of a silver round before and a gold one after, but Tolemek hadn't expected the guards to shoot at a kid. That was the reason he had enlisted someone young instead of talking the captain's men into helping. That and the fact that, should his mission prove fruitful, he didn't want to share the find with any other pirates.

"Problem?" the woman asked.

Yes. "No," he said and patted along the window ledge, hoping he might pull out some cracked piece of sandstone to use as a projectile.

"There are some rocks on the floor."

He eyed her. She hadn't moved, but had clearly deduced his problem from his wild lunges. Without saying anything, he patted around on the floor. He found a few chunks, then stuck his arm out the window again. Ridiculous angle, but he had to try.

He threw the first rock. It clanged off the roof eave, several inches from the pouch. He grimaced at the noise, but the monkeys were still

complaining about the gunshots, so he doubted anyone would hear it. Still, his grimace grew deeper as he tried three more times. The last time, the rock sailed past the pouch, six inches away. Curse the awkward angle—the bars made it impossible to make a decent throw, and he had limited ammunition.

"Need help?" the woman asked.

Tolemek snorted. "What are you going to do?"

"Hit whatever you're trying to hit, I imagine."

"Uh huh." He knelt to grope around for more rocks. "Can you even reach the window?"

"I'm not *that* short."

Though he was loath to waste even one rock, he wasn't having much luck himself. And she sounded oddly confident. Maybe she had a secret rock-throwing skill. Who knew?

Tolemek extended an arm toward her, a rock on his palm. She hesitated a moment before walking over, then visibly steeled herself before coming close enough to pluck it from his grasp. He wasn't surprised. His attire choices were more about convincing bloodthirsty pirates to leave him alone than scaring off women, but they had a dual effect. He backed away, so she wouldn't feel uncomfortable with him breathing on her neck—or the top of her head. She was barely five feet tall. Didn't the Iskandian army have height requirements?

Rock in hand, she looked out the window and located her target. She had to stand on tiptoes to stick her arm between the bars. He snorted again. If the angle had been awkward for him...

She stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth and threw the rock upward. A second passed, and she jumped and flung her arm out as far as she could.

Tolemek's mouth dropped open as she caught his pouch and landed back on the floor. He recovered his usual grim expression before she turned in his direction and was ready when she tossed the sack to him.

"You have dragon blood or something?" he asked.

The flash of surprise—and horror—that crossed her face told him that suggesting such was as much of a faux pas in Iskandia as it was in Cofahre, maybe more so. He lifted a hand, his instincts urging an apology, but she spoke first.

"I shoot things all day for the king. Hitting a target that close isn't much of a challenge." She strode to her spot against the door, folded her arms across her chest, and resumed watching him.

"Even when you're bleeding?"

At some point, her nose had started trickling again. She must have felt it, but she only sniffed. "It's not the first time."

These words were the admission she hadn't voiced before, and

Tolemek found himself starting to believe the commandant's claim. Zirkander wasn't his quest, not now, but he wouldn't mind paying that man back for all the lives he had ended. And for the military career he had ruined.

Tolemek splayed his fingers and looked down at his hand, a hand that had once held a sword for the Cofah army, a hand his father had once grasped with approval. If he brought one of Zirkander's people back to the captain, maybe the Roaming Curse could use her to lead them to him. To set a trap for him. To *kill* him. Goroth loathed Zirkander even more than Tolemek did.

He lifted his head and met the woman's eyes. He didn't smile—he didn't want to be too obvious that he wanted something from her—and forced a casual disinterest into his tone as he hefted the bag in his other hand. "I know the layout of Dragon Spit, above ground and under. And I aim to escape. Want to come with me?"

"Why'd you think I helped you with that pouch? I'm hoping you have something in it to handle the door."

"I was thinking beyond the door. I have a ship waiting in the harbor. You help me get what I'm looking for here, and I'll get you off Cofahre."

"Sure, Deathmaker. Sure, I'll hop right into your ship with you. With your chivalrous reputation, how could I go wrong?" While he was considering a response—his reputation might not be flattering, but he didn't think it had anything to do with being unchivalrous toward ladies—she surprised him by shrugging and adding, "I *will* happily get out of this monkey-kissed dungeon with you."

He wasn't surprised she didn't embrace his offer wholeheartedly—even if she couldn't guess at his ulterior motives, she had to be thinking that she would be, at best, trading one imprisonment for another—but it was good enough for now. He felt fairly certain she wouldn't shoot him in the back at the first opportunity, not if she believed he knew a way out. It was after they stepped into the jungle that he would have to keep an eye on her, lest she slip away and he lose his chance to get Zirkander. But that was something to worry about later. He had a stop to make before leaving the ancient fortress.

. . . . .

Cas moved out of the way so the pirate could approach the door. He was untying his pouch and eyeing the hinges.

"You can call me Tolemek," he said.

Oh, first names? He was schmoozing her now, eh? She would use it, but only because Deathmaker was on the unwieldy side.

"Ahn," was all she gave him. Maybe it was too much, but Cloak had already spilled the beer all over the table. He knew who she was,

and he had to be thinking the same way Cloak and his people were—that she was a route to the colonel. Let him think whatever he wanted, if he got her out of this prison.

He glanced at her, but she couldn't read his face. Probably because all that shaggy hair was hanging in front of it. What an animal. Wait, no, she had better not think of him like that. After all, Deathmaker was supposed to be a scientist, even if this man didn't look the part, a scientist who made horrible, horrible disease-filled devices that could kill legions of innocent people.

She leaned against the wall and watched him unwrap a couple of items from the pouch while wondering what kind of reward she might get for bringing him back to Iskandia in chains. Or maybe she could just bring his head. But decapitating people was gruesome, even by her standards. Growing up as her father's student had somewhat inured her to death, but there were levels of beastliness that a human being should never descend to.

Tolemek opened a glass vial with a glass stopper and used a slender brush to smear dark goop onto the hinges. He removed the lantern from the wall. "I have matches, but I might as well save them, since our guards were thoughtful enough to supply ambient lighting for our evening."

The casual tone and chatter didn't fit in with his look or his reputation, so she assumed he was trying to win her over. Like a hunter laying salt out in the woods for the goodly deer to enjoy, all the while waiting with a rifle in the trees. Even if he wasn't, she wasn't going to be anywhere around when he beelined for whatever ship he had in the harbor. She would find a freighter and take her chances stowing away.

Tolemek held the lantern up to the hinges. Cas lifted her brows, thinking he meant to light the substance—though that would be tough with the glass sides protecting the flame, but he was merely observing his work. Soon, the goop burst into a white flare.

The intensity of it made Cas blink and look away. Something clanked to the ground. By the time she looked back—it couldn't have been more than a second—Tolemek was tearing the door off and thrusting it sideways into the hall. The edge rammed into the startled guard's chest. Even though the man had been turning, swinging his weapon toward them, he didn't get a shot off. Tolemek used the door to shove him against the opposite wall. The man's grip loosened on his weapon.

Seeing an opportunity, Cas jumped through the door and caught the guard's rifle before it hit the ground. She leaped back, checking in both directions—and checking her pirate as well. He wasn't so busy bashing the guard into the wall that he didn't notice her grabbing the

firearm. Nobody else was around, so she trained it loosely on the guard, but the man's eyes were already rolled back into his head, the result of a few palm strikes from Tolemek.

Cas waited to see if he would argue over the rifle—or try to take it from her. He did *eye* it briefly, but he simply took the guard's sword belt, tightening it a few holes so he could hang it, complete with sword and cudgel on his own waist. Like he needed weapons to look fiercer. Cas gave him an insincere smile and risked getting close enough to slip the extra bullets out of the ammo pouch. She stayed on her toes, feeling like the deer watching the hunter, ready to dart away at any moment. Tolemek's eyebrows flickered, but he didn't say or do anything. After she had fished out the bullets, he headed down the hallway. *Not* in the direction that would lead to the stairs and the offices Cas had been led past on the way to her cell.

She eyed the lantern, but it had struck the floor hard in the melee, and oil was spilling from its dented cache. The gas lamps on the wall couldn't be removed, so she hoped he wasn't taking her anywhere dark. She jogged to catch up with him.

They hadn't gone more than twenty steps, passing several other closed oak doors, when he stopped before an intersection and raised a hand to halt her. "Don't fire unless it's an emergency," he whispered. "It'll be too loud. They'll sound an alarm, and there won't be time to... escape."

She resisted the urge to point out that he was stating the obvious. Besides, she was busy noticing that little hesitation. Escape wasn't the first thing on his mind, not when he seemed to have let himself get captured so he could get in here.

The sound of rustling clothing somewhere around the bend reminded her to focus on the moment. Without warning, he burst into a sprint, disappearing around the corner in a blink.

Startled, Cas hustled to the intersection. There were three guards in the hallway he had charged into. The closest one was on the floor, clutching his stomach; the farthest one was staggering backward, grabbing at his face with both hands—something dark and blotchy covered his eyes and nose. Tolemek was trying to take the middle one down, but this opponent had clearly had time to react. He had his sword out and swung it at the pirate's head.

Though shooting would have been a quick way to end the fight, Cas was as reluctant to make noise as he was. She grimaced as sword struck sword, the clash echoing in the hall. She raced to the man on the floor, who had recovered enough to get to his hands and knees. She kicked him in the side of the face. His head cracked against the sandstone wall hard enough that the thump rang out as loudly as the swords. The colonel would have found a way to take these men out

with more honor—or at least without kicking them while they were down—but her size didn't get her far in fisticuffs, and her mission was escaping, not sparing the lives of enemy soldiers. Fortunately, the crack against the wall dazed the man enough that she could remove his weapons without hurting him further. In addition to the standard cudgel and short sword, he had a pouch of Cofah throwing stars at his waist. She plucked it off with relish, glad for a projectile weapon that didn't involve gunpowder explosions.

She palmed one of the stars and stood, seeing if her pirate needed help. But the guard he had been trading sword blows with was down, his eyes rolled back in his head. The last man hadn't figured out how to remove whatever was sticking to his eyes, and he could only flail ineffectively with his sword. Tolemek dodged the swats, ducked under his arm, grabbed it, and twisted his wrist so the man dropped the blade. After shoving him against the wall, Tolemek grabbed a key ring off the guard's belt. He kicked open a door and thrust the man inside. Tolemek locked the door before his foe could recover. He grabbed the unconscious sword fighter and thrust him into another cell. It crossed Cas's mind to help manhandle the last guard inside, but she couldn't begin to lift one of these big men. Besides, Tolemek was handling the situation fine. He hoisted the last man into a cell and locked that door too.

Interesting that he hadn't killed anyone, given his reputation. Or maybe not. Even if Cloak had locked him into a cell, she was fairly certain he was Cofah and that these were his people or at least had been at one time. If this were an Iskandian prison, his choices might be different. No, given his record of killing her people, she was certain they *would* be different. She wondered if he knew there was a memorial on the Tanglewood Peninsula and that kin of the three hundred people who had died in that village made pilgrimages there every spring to pray for the souls of their lost loved ones.

With the last door locked, he faced her. Cas had the rifle in one hand and the throwing star in the other. A good fifteen feet separated them. Enough for her to throw one of the stars if she were of a mind to. If she did, could she get out on her own?

For a moment, they stared at each other, and she suspected he knew exactly what was on her mind. There was a wariness in his stance, like he was prepared to spring away if he needed to, but he didn't look that worried. He probably didn't think she was that dangerous with some enemy weapon native to his continent and not hers. She thought about showing him how dangerous she was, but what would that serve? Only to warn him that he had best keep an eye on her.

Cas waved at the hallway behind him. "What's the plan? There

another set of stairs that way?"

"Yes." Tolemek held her eyes for another long moment before turning his back on her to lead the way.

She watched the target area between his shoulder blades for several seconds before following. She hoped a moment wouldn't come when she regretted not taking the opportunity to plant a bullet or throwing knife there.

Another turn took them down another hallway of cell doors. On the positive side, it was devoid of guards. On the negative side, it was devoid of stairs or other exits too. That didn't keep the pirate from striding down to the end. There wasn't an interesting tapestry, decorative plant stand, or slyly placed lever that might suggest a secret door, but he rested his ear to the stone and thumped the blunt tip of the cudgel against it. Whatever he heard satisfied him, for he delved into his pouch, pulling out the vial again. He dabbed the goo on the sandstone, making a circle with it this time.

Cas leaned against a side wall so she could watch him as well as the way they had come.

"What is that stuff?" she asked, wondering where he had gotten it. The burning of the metal hinges had been handy, and if it could also burn holes in a six-inch-thick sandstone wall, that would truly impress her. She could think of a few useful applications for it back home.

"It doesn't really have a name." Tolemek kept dabbing at the wall, trying hard to stretch what little paste he had to complete his circle. They better not get locked up again, because he didn't look to have enough for another set of hinges.

"How can it not have a name?" Cas tried to imagine shopping for it in some exotic market by simply describing its properties.

"The creator didn't come up with one. Though I hear it's recorded as Brown Goo Number Three in his journal."

Oh, so this was something he had invented. Even though it had proven nothing but handy thus far, the admission, however oblique, chilled her. It was as if, in admitting to creating this little concoction, he had admitted to creating every horrible thing she had heard of the Roaming Curse using on its enemies—its *victims*.

"Chastor?" someone called from the hall around the corner, the hall with all the guards locked in cells. "Ponst?"

"Better hurry," Cas murmured.

"The wall is thick. This will take a minute."

Cas fingered the rifle, then decided on the throwing star. She bent her knees, readying herself in case a guard ran around the corner.

An acrid scent lit the air. She had been too busy running out to grab that first guard's weapon to notice it before, but she knew it was the goop burning. When she glanced back, the wall was charred and

smoking, but it was intact. Brown Goo Number Three might not be strong enough to help them escape again this time.

The guard in the other hall didn't call out again, but his footsteps echoed ahead of him. He was walking their way.

A grinding came from behind Cas, followed by a couple of grunts, then a crash as loud as a rifle shot. So much for not warning the whole fortress.

She started to cuss at Tolemek, but the guard ran around the corner. He halted so quickly he skidded as he gaped at the end of the hall. That didn't keep him from whipping his rifle butt to his shoulder. Cas was already hurling the throwing star. She trusted her aim and knew it would hit, but ducked anyway—she was the closest to the intersection, and that rifle had been pointing toward her.

It never went off. The throwing star lodged in his throat, slicing into his jugular. Blood spurted from the severed artery, and the rifle tumbled from his fingers, clacking onto the floor. He crumpled soon after.

Aware that beige stone dust had flooded the hall, Cas faced her pirate again. He had to have seen her take down the guard—so much for not showing him she was dangerous—but he didn't say a word. He stood by a circular hole in the wall, the gaping orifice opening into utter blackness, and extended a hand toward it, like a man holding the door open for a woman at a café. So much for her hope that they weren't going anywhere dark.

"No, no, you go first." Cas batted at the dust in the air, almost coughing when she spoke.

Tolemek slipped through the hole and disappeared. He looked like he had dropped down. She supposed it was too much to hope that he was simply leading her into some nice forgotten tunnels that would deposit them on a beach below the fortress.

Wishing she had kept the lantern that had been in their cell, Cas walked to the lip of the hole and peered inside. Her estimate of a six-inch wall had been off; it was more like a foot thick. That goo was powerful. The edges of the hole still smoked, and she wouldn't have touched them if she hadn't already seen Tolemek do so.

"How far of a drop is it?" she whispered.

She didn't want to stall—someone would have heard that noise, and the dead guard would soon be missed, too—but she couldn't see more than two feet into the gap. She had the sense of a vertical shaft dropping away and didn't see any stairs.

Tolemek didn't respond. He hadn't done something stupid like falling to his death, had he? For a moment, she thought she would have to go back the other way and hope she could avoid notice, but his voice finally drifted up from below.

“Fifteen feet to a landing. Then there are stairs. Sort of.”

Well, didn’t that sound promising?

He didn’t sound farther down than his estimate, so Cas took his word. She ought to be able to land from that height without breaking anything. She stuck her feet through the hole and slithered over the edge. For a silly moment, she wondered what the view looked like from below. She might be an expert marksman, but nobody had ever accused her of amazing athleticism.

She lowered herself down, probing with her feet, though logically, she knew she would never reach the floor without letting go. Also, her boots pressed against some squishy substance growing on the wall. Maybe it was better without the lantern.

“You out of the way?” she asked before letting go.

“Does that mean you don’t want me to catch you?”

“It means I don’t want to kick your ear off as my legs flail around on the way down.”

“Thoughtful.” His voice had shifted—he’d moved to the side.

He hadn’t truly been thinking of catching her, had he? Having the Deathmaker’s hands wrapped around her waist sounded a lot more creepy than it did thoughtful or pleasant.

A gong reverberated somewhere in the distance. Alarm. No more dawdling.

Cas released her grip and fell into the darkness, her heart in her throat. Without any light, she couldn’t gauge the distance to the bottom, and could only guess when she needed to soften her knees for impact. The landing jarred her nonetheless, though a hand caught her arm, steadying her. Tolemek released her almost as soon as he touched her.

“Thanks,” she said grudgingly.

The air was warm and close, smelling of the jungle, of plants and decaying matter. The gong was barely audible from down in the well, but she heard it nonetheless.

“You’re welcome,” Tolemek said. “The stairs are behind you. I’ll lead.”

“Good, because I wasn’t going to volunteer.”

He didn’t light a match. She supposed his stash would burn out quickly if he did. She found a wall with her palm, grimacing at the bumpy algae—or whatever it was—growing on the old stone. It was on the stairs too. Her boots squished with each step. At least they were going down. Down was good. There should be a way out to the beach or the jungle from below the main fortress.

The stairs, beneath the inch of algae, felt old and worn. More than that, in several spots, the edge crumbled beneath her boot.

“What is this place?” she whispered as they continued to descend.

Their cell had been on the second story of the three-story fortress. Though there were no landings to help judge it, Cas already felt as if they had descended three or four floors.

"Long ago, there was a dragon rider outpost in the base of this cliff," Tolemek said. "*Real* dragons, not little mechanical fliers designed to look vaguely like dragons."

"Should you be insulting my people's aircraft when I'm walking behind you with a gun?" She said it lightly, though his tone had miffed her.

She expected some dismissive comeback, but he descended a few more steps before responding with, "Probably not. Are you as deadly with a rifle as you are with a throwing star?"

"I've had more practice with firearms."

"I thought you were too young to be what the commandant claimed, but I'm beginning to believe that Zirkander would have recruited you."

His tone didn't drip malice when he said the colonel's name, but the alarm gongs that went off in Cas's head rang far more clearly than those in the fortress above. She didn't want to discuss Zirkander with him, or her work at all. The last thing she wanted was to slip up and give away some useful intelligence, especially to someone who could make explosive goop and only the gods knew what else.

"Were you with the squadron last summer?" Tolemek asked in the same conversational tone, but there might have been the faintest edge to it. A were-you-among-those-who-fired-on-our-dirigibles-and-nearly-killed-the-captain-and-me-last-summer edge.

"Where I am is watching your back until you get me out of this dungeon, and I think we can leave it at that." Another throwing star had found its way into Cas's hand. The cold steel was reassuring against her thumb. Maybe she would leave it there until the fresh jungle air was upon her face and Tolemek had taken off in his ship.

Chapter 3

The stairs ended at a wide corridor with the stone floors pockmarked with age. Some of the holes were deep enough to be considered craters, sizable obstacles in the darkness. Tolemek walked near the edge, fingers following the wall, taking care to test each step before he committed to it. He wasn't expecting booby traps in the centuries-abandoned fortress, but crumbling floors could drop him into a pit as easily as an ancient architect's whims. And then there was the woman walking behind him, making his shoulder blades itch. Thus far, she had been helpful, but it didn't take some telepath of yore to sense that she believed she would be doing the world a favor by getting rid of him.

They came to the first intersection, the wall disappearing and his fingers brushing air, so Tolemek concentrated on the route. He had memorized the old map he'd found before coming, but it would be easy to grow disoriented down here in the dark. The few matches he had wouldn't do any good without a lamp to light, and he doubted he would find one down here that still had oil in it. Or whatever they had used back then. There were tales that said the halls in the sorcerers' homes were simply alight with their magic.

Something rustled through the algae on the floor, whispering past his boot. Not magic, but a snake. Whatever sorcerous power had once imbued this place was gone, leaving nothing but ruins. He wondered if he was a fool to believe he would find anything here.

At the third intersection, Tolemek said, "Left," and turned down it.

Lieutenant Ahn grumbled something under her breath, but kept following.

"I *do* have a couple of likely escape routes in mind," he said. "After I find what I'm looking for, I believe I can get us to the jungle."

She didn't answer promptly. He admitted *likely* and *believe* weren't the most encouraging words he could have used. Since he had only studied the fortress from a distance, he was reluctant to promise more. He feared that at any moment, the route would be blocked by rubble from some hundred-year-old cave-in. He had memorized a couple of routes to the library, just in case, but so far the only obstacle was the

musty air. Possibly the snakes.

"How does this stuff grow down here without light?" Ahn mused.

"I've wondered that. Perhaps some residual energy left in the walls from those ancient sorcerers. Plants are highly adaptable, and most ecological niches get filled, given enough time."

Her grunt suggested she wasn't that interested in his theories. Or that discussions of sorcerers made her uneasy. Or maybe she was imagining sinking her throwing stars into his back again.

Tolemek was counting doors, or rather doorways since the wood had long since rotted away, and didn't speak again. He wondered if the books and scrolls he hoped to find had rotted with age too. He hoped the ancient scribes had used their magic to preserve some of them.

"This is it," he whispered when they reached the fifth doorway.

"The treasure room?" Ahn guessed.

Was that what she thought this was? Some quest for gold? He supposed it was as plausible a theory as any. "In a manner of speaking. This was their library."

He slipped inside, forgetting some of his caution. He almost didn't notice the long pause before she asked, "You planning to study some ancient magics?" She had stopped at the doorway. "To help you make better... goo?"

Her tone was full of wariness. She knew his name, the rumors surrounding him. She had to be uneasy down here with him, understandably so. He wasn't sure how to settle that unease. He also hadn't figured out how he was going to get her to his ship, short of overpowering her and knocking her out. As long as they were close, and she didn't have the range to throw something sharp at him, he figured he *could* overpower her, but that seemed a poor reward for the help she had provided so far. If she hadn't been there when that guard had rounded the corner, he would have aimed at Tolemek instead of her. Waiting for his goo to work at the end of the hall, he had been too far away to do a thing about it. But simply letting her escape into the jungle? He didn't know if he could do that either.

"I prefer science to magic when it comes to my goos," he said. "Not that I know enough about magic to know if it has any useful applications, regardless, but this—what I seek here—is to help another, not myself."

"Some lover or relative sick?"

"What?" he blurted, almost tripping into one of the pockmarks in the floor.

In the darkness, he couldn't see the shrug, but he heard it in her voice. "They say some of those old sorcerers were healers."

Tolemek's first reaction was to stop talking or to brush her off. Her

guess had been a little too close—not even the captain knew what exactly he was searching for and why. But maybe he could lessen her wariness by talking about his family, making her believe that no matter what she had heard, he was simply a person.

A person who wanted to entrap her for his own gains. He grimaced at himself. Why was he even worrying about her when he had reached the room he had been scheming and planning to reach for the last three months?

"Not a lover," he said by way of completing the conversation. "My little sister."

"Oh."

Tolemek fished out a match from his pouch and found a wall to scrape it on. The flame flared to life, revealing walls full of stone bookcases, *empty* stone bookcases. A few old tables had been pushed to the sides of the big room, and an expanse of mostly bare floor lay before him. The mold wasn't growing on it, but piles of fine gray dust undulated across it. Rat and snake tracks disturbed it in places, but there was so much that it hadn't been scattered completely by time or visitors.

Frowning, he crept forward and crouched, touching his finger to one of the piles. His match burned down, searing his flesh and going out, at the same time as he realized what he was looking at. Not dust. Ashes.

He snarled and slammed his hand into the hard floor. He couldn't see them now in the darkness, but he felt the ashes stirring and rising into the air, tickling his nostrils with the scent of ancient books and scrolls long destroyed. Oh, he didn't know how long it had truly been, but it didn't matter if it had been a year or hundreds of years. He was too late.

. . . . .

Cas waited in the darkness beside the doorway. She wanted to get going—this far under the main fortress, she couldn't heard the alarm anymore, but she wagered it was still going on, and it wouldn't take long for guards to find that huge hole in the wall. Still, she suspected Tolemek would want to search further, if he had made the journey here specifically for this. Whatever this was. That room hadn't looked promising from what she had seen in the handful of seconds the match had been lit, but maybe there was more to it.

"We can go," he said scarce seconds later. He hadn't even bothered to light another match.

Cas thought about telling him she was sorry he hadn't found what he was looking for, but she wasn't sure she believed his story about wanting to help his sister. For all she knew, he was looking for

something to turn into a weapon. “I’m ready.”

He took the lead again, and she followed him through the dark passages, using a hand on the wall to feel her way along. She tried not to feel uneasy about the fact that she would be lost down here without him. Usually, she had a good sense of direction, but they had taken a few turns, and the darkness made it hard to note landmarks.

“Right turn,” Tolemek said, “and a tight squeeze.”

She found the gap in the wall, using both hands to get a feel for the opening. It wasn’t tight by her standards, more like the width of a closet door rather than a wide corridor. But as soon as she turned after him and bumped into his back, she understood what he meant. Maybe it *was* a closet.

“You can pick your hole,” Tolemek said, shifting to the side, “though my understanding from the blueprint I studied is that they all come together into a single vertical shaft that drops eighty feet before joining with the current sewage removal system.”

Cas stuck her foot forward, trying to find whatever hole—or holes—he was talking about. But she smacked her toe on a wall. No, the base of a shelf or bench. It took a moment for her to realize where they were. Not quite a closet. “Is this a latrine?”

“Yes. A centuries-old one. There shouldn’t be any biological contaminants left, if you’re concerned about cleanliness.”

Cleanliness? Please. “The eighty-foot-drop you mentioned is more problematic for me. Unless you’ve got a coil of rope hidden in that little pouch of yours.” She was beginning to see why he’d arranged to have himself captured instead of simply using his concoctions to infiltrate the ruins from below.

“Rope would have been impractical for someone to throw across the courtyard to my window.”

“Maybe so, but it would have made a much bigger target to aim at with a rock.”

He snorted. “The walls are somewhat slippery, making climbing up the shaft difficult, but I think we’ll be able to slow ourselves down enough to land on the bottom at a reasonable, unlikely-to-break-bones speed.”

How comforting. “I’m going to refrain from making sarcastic comments or telling you to stuff your head in a latrine, but only because I could be stuck back in that cell and waiting for my next beating right now.”

“And because I *will* be stuffing my head in a latrine?”

Huh, her pirate had a sense of humor. How odd for someone named Deathmaker. “Yeah, that too.”

Tolemek lit a match. “So we can see what we’re getting into.”

Between his description and her time feeling around, Cas already

had an image of the place in her head, and it proved fairly accurate. Three holes in a sandstone shelf were all that remained of the latrine. The rims of the openings had crumbled away, so they were larger than they would have originally been. She could squeeze through one, yes, and he probably could, too, though it would be a tight fit.

When he held the match over one of the holes, she peered inside. If there was an opening at the bottom, it was too far down to see. He dropped the match inside, and for a moment, she had a good view of those walls before the flame went out, long before it got close to the bottom. The important thing was that the shaft appeared narrow enough for her to climb slowly down, bracing herself with her arms and legs. The stone was stained with time—or something more visceral—but wasn't cloaked in algae and hadn't appeared that slick in the light.

"I'll go first," Tolemek said.

"All right, but do me a favor, will you?"

"Such as?"

"If you slip and fall to your death, try to crash down in a way that won't leave those spiky bracers pointing up for me to land on."

"I'll keep your request in mind." He climbed into one of the holes, grunting as flesh smacked against stone.

Cas waited for the curses, scrapes, and bumps to fade away before she stuck the pouch of throwing stars into her mouth and climbed onto the shelf. She almost left the rifle there, but thought she could make something of a lap as she descended, her legs out and her back against the wall, and keep it from falling. She thought about waiting long enough for him to climb down the entire eighty feet, so that if she fell—or dropped the rifle—she wouldn't knock him loose, but there had to be guards searching in the ruins by now. She imagined one running in, looking down, and shooting her while she was helpless. She didn't want to die in some latrine drainage shaft.

With that cheery thought, she lowered herself into the hole, pressing her back against one side and her legs against the other. She lowered one hand, then the other, from the rim of the hole and placed them on the walls to either side.

"A promising start," she murmured when she didn't slip, then inched her way downward.

It didn't take long for her to find the slick spots Tolemek had mentioned. When that happened, she slipped inches—or feet—before catching herself on coarser material. Each time, her heart tried to leap out of her chest, doubtlessly searching for a less insane place to reside. She almost lost the rifle a couple of times too. Tolemek would not be pleased if it cracked him on the head, but maybe those thick ropes of hair would offer padding.

Without being able to see a thing in the blackness, it was hard to judge how far she had gone, but she guessed she was halfway down when her butt bumped into something. That gave her heart another jolt. It turned out to be a bend in the shaft. The passage curved in one direction before returning to vertical, and maneuvering past the hump, which was slick of course, was scarier than her first time upside down in a flier had been. At least she didn't pee on herself—a couple of her classmates at the academy had done that on some of their early flights. Although, if one were to have such an accident, this would be the natural place for it, she supposed.

"Ahn?" a soft call came from below.

She had lost track of time, so it surprised her. "Yeah?" she asked around the pouch of throwing stars, her voice as tense as the rest of her body.

"I'm on the ground. We made it." Tolemek sounded like he was about ten feet down and standing right under the hole. Lucky for him that she had managed to keep bodily functions under control.

"Are your bracers out of the way?" she asked.

"Yes." He sounded amused. Maybe deep down, pirates knew their wardrobes were silly.

Cas's heart got one more jolt when she ran out of wall to brace herself against, and one of her feet slipped, dangling into emptiness. Her hands pressed against the side walls like immovable anchors. She didn't say anything, but Tolemek must have heard her suck in an alarmed breath, for his hand came up to touch her leg. "You've got a seven- or eight-foot drop, and then it's flat down here."

She didn't want to admit that his touch reassured her, but since she couldn't see a thing, it did. She let herself drop, twisting in the air to land facing him and grabbing him as she fell—just in case he was on a ledge and there happened to be another hundred-foot drop for the foolish girl who missed it. Her feet landed on solid stone. She released a long, relieved breath.

"Are you trying to undress me?" Tolemek asked mildly. She had a death grip on his vest, her fingers clenched in the thick hide, and he was probably missing a few chest hairs too. "Or just admiring the feel of my clothing?"

As soon as he spoke, Cas released him and took a step back, glad for the darkness. An embarrassed blush heated her cheeks. She pulled the pouch out of her mouth and strove for a nonchalant response. "It *is* an upgrade to what they gave me to wear."

Fortunately, he didn't make any more jokes about her grabbing him —or mention that he'd noticed that the climb down had scared her. "Getting out should be easy from here," he said, turning away from her. "This way."

Cas followed him down a new passage, this one with water trickling down the middle—water that didn't smell all that fresh—and was relieved when a warm breeze touched her cheeks. Finally.

They turned around a bend, and the blackness faded to gray, the bumpy green walls growing visible. The end of a tunnel came into view beyond a grid of rusted iron bars. The alarm gongs were audible again, and Cas wondered how many guards would be out there, searching for the escaped prisoners.

"You have any more of that metal-burning goo?" she murmured as they walked toward the bars.

"No, but I already applied it." Tolemek strode toward the grate. "Last night, when I was hoping I could get into the ruins without having to deal with the dungeon or its guards."

That meant Cas never would have met him—and would still be in her cell—if not for a thousand-year-old latrine. Fate was a capricious spirit.

Tolemek lifted a hand to stop her and dropped into a crouch near the wall. They were still twenty feet from the bars but close enough that she could see hinges, identifying it as a gate, and a shiny new steel lock securing it.

"Looks like someone noticed your sabotage," Cas said.

"Annoyingly efficient of them."

The sounds of foliage being snapped and trampled drifted in from outside. Someone in a uniform jogged past the entrance. The figure glanced in their direction, but continued on without pausing to peer more closely. Glad for the shadows, Cas reached in her pouch for another throwing star. She still had the rifle as well, but if they could slip past the guards without making any noise, they would have more time to escape into the jungle. Then again, if they were forced to engage in a skirmish out there, that might be her opportunity to slip away from her pirate, especially if the guards, considering him more dangerous, focused on him. Once she was on the other side of those bars, she could find her own way home.

"Anything left in your little pouch that can handle locks? Or iron bars?" Cas asked.

"Unfortunately not. We'll have to try another exit. There are others."

Cas shifted from foot to foot. The jungle called to her. Out there, in the night, she could hide. Here, they were simply waiting to be discovered. "I can shoot the lock off."

The lock was shiny and new, but so were her bullets.

"Guns don't solve every problem," Tolemek said, heading for the interior again. "And making noise will tell them where we are."

It would tell them where *he* was. If the guards spotted him, they

might forget to worry about her, at least for a few moments. That was all she needed.

Tolemek had no more than stepped past her when Cas lifted the rifle. She fired three rounds at the lock shank from far enough away that the bullets shouldn't hit her if they ricocheted off. But the lock lost the war early on and clanked to the ground. Cas walked up to the gate, gave it a shove, and it squealed open.

"Guns do solve a *lot* of problems." She smiled at Tolemek as he ran back to join her.

"The guards will have heard that."

Cas loaded bullets to replace those she had used. "I expected another fight before getting out of here." With the guards... or with him. One or the other.

She started forward, intending to use the mouth of the tunnel for cover and to shoot anyone who ran their way. But Tolemek gripped her arm, stopping her.

Shouts of, "Over there," and, "The drainage tunnel," accompanied the crashing of foliage.

"What're you doing?" Cas demanded.

"I have one more tool to use." Tolemek opened his palm, revealing a leather-wrapped ball.

"Uh?"

He pulled her back through the gate and into the shadows of the tunnel. She was tempted to yank free and fight her own battle—the jungle foliage wasn't more than a hundred meters away, so if she could subdue the guards in sight, she ought to be able to sprint out there to it... but Tolemek's grip was firm, and he could probably sling her over his shoulder without much trouble. She went along with him. She could shoot from the back of the tunnel if she had to.

"Down," he whispered, crouching again.

A second later, the first guard came into the sight, a dark outline against the jungle. Cas melted to the ground, making herself a small target, and lifted the rifle to aim.

"Wait," Tolemek breathed in her ear.

Two more guards came into view, one holding a lantern, both armed. Cas's finger tightened on the trigger. They might not be able to see her and Tolemek in the deep shadows, but if they started firing into the tunnel, they were bound to hit them.

"They go in? Or run out?"

"They must have come from in there and run out."

A soft rustle of clothing came from behind Cas. The little leather ball flew through the gate, bounced on the ground, and came to rest between the men. Its sides unfurled like flower petals, and some sort of smoke oozed out.

"What is that thing?"

One of the guards shot at the ball, which was inches from another man's foot. Everyone jumped back. The unfurled ball seemed undamaged; if anything it spewed more smoke.

"You boys all right down there?" someone asked from the side.

"I..." The guard who had fired—and doubtlessly caught a big whiff of the smoke—grabbed his forehead and stumbled backward. The next closest man simply pitched to the ground. The third soon followed.

Cas thought she heard a couple of thumps from near the tunnel exit too. How potent was that smoke? She couldn't smell anything in the tunnel, but it had to have a decent range.

"Poison?" she whispered, her stomach queasy at the thought. Yes, she would have shot the guards with the rifle, but somehow this seemed more diabolical.

"Not exactly." Tolemek rose and trotted to the exit. He leaned out and scanned the surroundings to either side before waving for Cas to join him.

She was already on her way, though she held her breath as she drew closer. Just in case.

Tolemek headed straight across the clearing around the base of the fortress toward a vine-draped trail that disappeared into the dark jungle. Cas paused to touch the throat of the first man who had fallen, checking for a pulse. Surprisingly, it was there, beating normally. Aware of the alarm gongs and more shouts in the distance, she ran for the foliage too.

She thought to veer off in a different direction, to find another trail into the jungle, but Tolemek had stopped to wait for her. Was he being thoughtful? Or did he want to make sure he didn't lose her for his own reasons? The latter seemed more likely. But as thick and dense as the vegetation was, she ought to be able to slip away at any point along the trail once they entered the jungle.

"You made them fall asleep?" Cas wondered, noting that he hadn't killed anyone in their entire escape. She couldn't make that same claim.

"They're unconscious. They shouldn't wake up for a half hour to an hour, depending on how much they inhaled." Tolemek looked like he might take her arm, but he stopped himself and simply pointed toward the dark jungle. "More will be coming."

"Right." Cas strode down the path, glancing back before they left the clearing. Dragon Spit leered down from atop its rocky precipice, rock that wasn't as solid as she had assumed when her cage on wheels had been hauled up the winding road to the top earlier that day. That road and the entire above-ground complex were lit by lights now, dozens of yellow dots against the night. There had to be a lot more

guards out there searching.

She and Tolemek slipped into the jungle. Though the main road meandered along the rocky coast, that would doubtlessly be watched. Their trail seemed to parallel the coast, but it was difficult to be certain. Even though it seemed to be regularly used, vines and large leaves hung low, and they had to duck often. Branches scraped at Cas's bare shins, and once again, she lamented the shapeless canvas smock she had been forced to don. The shoes—more like moccasins—had soles like paper, and she felt every root and rock on the trail. When she wasn't tripping over something, she was stepping into mud that kicked up, spattering her legs.

The monkeys had fallen silent, but numerous large creatures shifted and rattled the leaves as they passed. A tiger or panther roared in the distance. Even though the jungle didn't sound like a friendly place for a solo traveler, Cas would rather face it than a ship full of pirates.

The trail split, and she saw her chance. Tolemek veered toward the left. Cas would take the right.

She hadn't taken more than a single step in that direction when dark shadows oozed out of the foliage. She barely managed to keep from yelping with surprise when someone appeared right in front of her, blocking her route. She whipped her rifle up, but someone grabbed her from behind. She tried to jerk away, to back into the brush so she would have more space to shoot, but the firearm was torn from her grip. She dipped her hand toward the pouch of throwing stars, but the man behind her caught both of her arms before she could grasp a weapon. She stomped down on his foot, but he was wearing boots, and her pathetic cloth shoes lent nothing to the power of her heel.

Lanterns snapped open, and yellow light filled the pathway. Scarred, bearded faces full of missing or dead, brown teeth leered at her. Tattooed arms were wrapped about her body, restraining her—and squeezing all of the air out of her lungs. All manner of pistols and daggers were being waved about, more than one pointing in her direction. Cas's first ludicrous thought was that these were some savage jungle nomads or bandits who scraped out a living by preying on those who dared walk these paths, but she realized the truth as soon as she spotted Tolemek. He was standing, his hands on his hips, next to a gray-haired man wearing an Iskandian general's gold-braided hat, a spyglass on a thong around his neck, and a breastplate made of human finger bones. There were stories of cannibalism among some of the pirate clans, but they were *just* stories. Weren't they?

"I wasn't expecting you, Captain," Tolemek said as calmly as if everyone had shown up to smoke and play cards together. He looked at Cas and waved to the hulking man holding her. The death grip

around her torso loosened slightly, though she still couldn't have slipped a hand down to those throwing stars. At least the pirates had only taken her rifle so far. Maybe she could still find an opportunity to escape.

"We *were* planning to while away the evening in the tavern, conducting a few repairs, and dodging a few lawmen," the gray-haired man said, tapping his spyglass against the breastplate in a soft *clink-thunk* pattern. Was this Captain Slaughter? If so, he was one of the most powerful among the Roaming Curse, and perhaps the most infamous. "But some soldiers came by and were bragging about how they'd so daringly and cunningly captured you and that the commandant was going to torture you ceaselessly. I grew worried about you." He flashed a grin—his teeth weren't quite so poorly cared for as many of the ones in the other pirates' mouths. "And my next batch of projectile naphtha you promised."

"Your concern is touching," Tolemek said drily.

Dry tone or not, when the captain thumped him on the shoulder, Tolemek shared the man's smile. Cas didn't like the easy camaraderie she sensed between the two. With her, Tolemek had seemed normal. Even solicitous. Oh, she was sure he had been using her all along, but, reputation or not, he hadn't seemed like some vile monster. That might change now that he was back among his pirate brethren. Damn, she wished she had veered into the jungle just a few seconds sooner. She might have watched this reunion from some nearby treetop and then sped off before anyone caught her.

"It seems you escaped on your own," the captain said. "Can't say I'm surprised."

Several of the men nodded and chuckled.

"But this isn't quite what I thought you were searching for." The captain extended a hand toward Cas.

"No," Tolemek said.

She caught his eyes—or maybe he was studying her at that moment anyway—and silently implored him to keep quiet about who she was. Or even to let her go. Did he have that kind of sway? Or were all decisions in regard to prisoners left to the captain?

"She someone special?" the captain asked. "Or were you just feeling randy tonight?"

That drew snorts and more chuckles.

"She ain't much to look at," the man standing in front of Cas said. Yeah? Who was he to talk? How could he even chew his dinner with those teeth? "Not with all them bruises. Her whole face looks like someone used it for a punching bag. There's some girls in town who—er..." The pirate's expression grew nervous, almost contrite, when he glanced at Tolemek.

“Wouldn’t be afraid to sleep with the Deathmaker?” The captain smirked.

“I don’t know,” Brown Teeth said. “I mean, I haven’t asked. I figure he’s purty enough, but I ain’t a girl, so I don’t know if’n... uhm...” The man clasped his hands behind his back, apparently deciding he had shot enough holes in his flier.

The captain smacked Tolemek on the chest. “Darts just called you pretty. If the girl doesn’t entertain you tonight, I think you’ve got a backup invitation.”

“Coming up behind us,” someone called softly from ten meters back down the trail.

“Shutter those lanterns, boys,” the captain said, pulling a pistol from his belt. “Target practice coming.”

Cas caught a grimace on Tolemek’s face before the lights disappeared. Her captor—she had yet to see the man’s face, but he had the meaty arms of a smith and the breath of a dead fish—dragged her a couple of steps into the foliage. After the light, it took her eyes a moment to adjust, and she wasn’t the first to see the figures jogging up the path toward them. Three guards. It was too dark to make out their uniforms, but who else would be searching the jungle at night?

At some unspoken signal, several pistols fired at once.

Two guards crumpled immediately. The rearmost one cried out in pain and tried to run. More pistols fired, hammering him in the back. He toppled into the brush beside the trail.

The lanterns came back up.

“Guess this isn’t the best place for a confabulation.” The captain grinned and dipped into an ammo pouch to reload his pistol. Cas’s gaze snagged on the pouch for a moment. It was probably made from some kind of hide, but that might have been human skin too.

She told herself that as long as she wasn’t locked in a Cofah cell, her odds of finding a way back home were still better than they had been before, but it was a struggle to find greater optimism than that.

She wondered what Tolemek thought about the downed guards. After he had worked hard not to kill anyone all night. His face didn’t give away much. His ropes of hair hung around his eyes, shadowing them, helping hide his thoughts. Maybe that was why he preferred the style. Or maybe he simply didn’t care, and his earlier efforts had been nothing more than experimenting with his various toys. Most of the pirates had the bronze skin and dark hair of the Cofah, though one had black skin and a couple others might have been from Iskandia. Wherever they hailed from originally, they didn’t seem to mind killing the Cofah.

“Let’s get back to the *Night Hunter*,” the captain said. “Too much law down here on land.”

“I have an errand to attend to first,” Tolemek said. “It shouldn’t take long. I’ll meet you at the ship.”

“And the girl?”

“She helped me escape. Treat her well.” Tolemek looked around the circle of men, but he also pinned the captain with his gaze. The command pleased Cas, but she wondered what he risked in trying to give an order to his superior officer. Maybe the Deathmaker had enough of a reputation that Slaughter, too, walked lightly around him?

“You mean, treat her well on the way to town and give her a swat on the rump to say goodbye, or treat her well on the way to our ship where we take her on?” The captain rested a fist against his hip. “If it’s the latter, I’ll be knowing who you’re bringing aboard and why.”

Cas held her breath. This was her chance. If Tolemek gave the word, she’d be let go. At the moment, he was the only one who knew who she was, the only one who cared.

He met her eyes and didn’t answer the captain right away. She lifted her chin and stared back at him. She wouldn’t plead—appearing weak in front of these scavengers was the last thing she dared—but she had to make sure he knew what she would prefer—after all, he had offered her a ride on his ship. She had answered with sarcasm but hadn’t given a straight-out no. What if he thought he would be doing her a favor, taking her across the sea, closer to Iskandia?

“I can find my own way home from here,” Cas said.

“Wait.” A pirate in the back of the group stepped forward, raising his lantern toward her. He had matted blond hair and paler skin than the Cofah men.

Cas’s stomach sank lower than the pouch of throwing stars. She didn’t recognize the man, but what if he recognized her somehow? She hadn’t been flying long enough to be notorious, not like Zirkander and some of the older pilots, but there were pictures of the heroic flier squadrons back home, especially in the capital city, where they had their air base. She had been recognized on the street before.

“That’s Gargon Ahnsung’s daughter,” the pirate said.

Cas didn’t move, though her heart threatened to beat its way out of her chest. Was this some colleague—former colleague—of her father’s? If her father had ever killed a Roaming Curse member, she might not be any better off than if they knew her as one of Zirkander’s squadron, but at least they wouldn’t think to use her against the colonel. That would be intolerable.

“The sniper?” the captain asked.

Tolemek’s eyebrows rose. “I guess that explains the accuracy with rocks.”

“Yeah,” Cas managed—her mouth was dry. “We all get together

and see if we can knock over empty bean cans at family picnics." In another situation, she would have laughed at the idea of her father hosting some family gathering, not only because she was his only living relative, but because he was as social as a mountain lion.

The pale-skinned pirate was nodding. "Yup, that's her. I been out to Ahnsung's house once to deliver a message, back when I worked for the guild. Seen her then, shooting bows with him out back. Must have been nearly ten years ago, but she was a pretty little thing." The pirate grinned. "Deathmaker, she might be all right once them bruises heal up. You might want to keep her."

Cas bit down her tongue to keep from calling the man a creep for ogling her when she'd been a thirteen-year-old girl. Nobody was cursing or sharing irate whispers about her father—hells, these criminals probably respected a mercenary sniper—so she might still get out of this alive.

"She flies with Zirkander now though," the pirate added.

"*What?*" The captain's head jerked up—no his whole body jerked to attention, the finger bone breastplate rattling with the movement.

A blast of other exclamations, some curses, some streams of anger and disbelief, came from other mouths. The arm around Cas's waist tightened again, putting images of boa constrictors in her mind.

The oh-so-helpful pirate snapped his fingers. "'Course, you must have known that, Deathmaker. That's why you brought her out, isn't it? Now that's a fine prize."

"I'll say," the captain whispered, his eyes as hard as steel as they bored into her. One of his hands was balled into a fist, and the other clenched the hilt of his pistol. "That man ruined—" He was so choked with emotion—with *rage*—that he could barely speak. "Were you flying with him last summer, girl?"

Cas doubted he would believe her if she lied—he didn't look like a man ready to believe anything that would interrupt his right to rage—but she kept her mouth shut. Wasn't there a quotation about silence never getting a man in trouble?

The captain slowly pulled out his pistol—every eye there was riveted by it, by him—and stepped toward her. "Answer me, girl. Were you with him last summer?" Between one word and the next, he shifted from a whisper to a yell. "Did you help take down my ship?"

The pirate holding Cas stepped forward, forcing her closer to the captain. She tried to squirm free, to kick him or find an arm she could bite, but the man was no amateur at restraining prisoners.

The captain stalked closer, his face burning as hot and red as a furnace.

Cas didn't notice Tolemek move, but he was suddenly there beside the captain, pressing his forearm—and the pistol—toward the ground.

Several of the surrounding pirates drew in startled breaths. The tension was thicker in the air than the humidity.

"She's nothing compared to Zirkander," Tolemek said. "And she's worth even less dead. We can use her to get to him. Set a trap, make her the bait."

Even though Cas had suspected Tolemek had something like that in mind all along, she felt an overpowering urge to shoot him. If only these louts hadn't taken her gun. She had to settle for hurling daggers with her eyes.

The captain looked down at the hand on his arm, then lifted his gaze to Tolemek's. He was hurling a few blades with his eyes, too, but he finally stuffed his pistol back in its holster and muttered, "It must be nice to be able to see everything so logically all the time."

"A boon and a bane," Tolemek said. He glanced at Cas, but must not have liked what he saw on her face, for he soon looked away. "My errand won't take long. Put her in my cabin, and treat her well," he said again, then added, "She'll make poor bait if Zirkander can't recognize her."

The captain walked with him several paces away from the group, and they exchanged a few words. Tolemek must have soothed the older man's anger, for their discussion ended with the captain slapping him on the back and waving. Once again, Cas feared she had made a mistake in not bolting in those first few seconds in the jungle. A big mistake.

Chapter 4

The airship's hull was painted black, the deck was painted black, and the balloon above was dyed black, so Cas was surprised when the wooden bulkheads and floors below had merely been treated with a clear varnish. Her pirate escort had dwindled to two, but there were guards at the railing next to the sophisticated disembarkation device: a rope leading down to the beach. There were also numerous people walking about on the main deck, all of them armed. It seemed against pirate law to carry less than three weapons about, even when engaged in repairs or polishing cannons. Even if Cas somehow subdued her escort, her odds of getting off the airship weren't good.

The guards pushed her below decks and down a narrow corridor. She could stand up straight, but the bigger men had to duck their heads. They stopped before a side door. They looked at it, then at her, then at each other.

"Deathmaker said to put her in his cabin, right?" one whispered.

"I think so. But maybe we could put her in one of the cells until he gets back."

"He said to put her inside."

"He doesn't usually... I mean nobody goes in his cabin except the captain. If he does girls, he doesn't do them here."

"Maybe she's special."

"Maybe the door's locked."

If Cas's predicament had been less dire, she might have rolled her eyes at this waffling. Why did she get the feeling that neither of them wanted to go through that door?

"Try it."

One of the men grabbed the latch. It turned freely, and he pushed the door open. Neither of them walked right in. The cabin inside stood dark, so Cas couldn't tell much about its occupant, but there was a faint chemical smell. Was this where he made his batches of goo?

"I'll, uh, get a lantern. And shackles. Even if he wants to have some fun, he won't want her touching his stuff." The speaker released Cas's arm and walked farther along the corridor, then disappeared down a ladder, leaving her with one guard.

She eyed the pistol holstered at his belt. A six-shooter, but she didn't see an ammo pouch. It would be risky, but if it was fully loaded, she might have enough rounds to take care of him and clear the deck above, at least for long enough for her to sprint to that rope.

"What's the slimy substance on the floor? Should it be smoking like that?" Cas tilted her chin toward the dark cabin.

"What?" Eyes bulging, the guard took a step back, his grip on her loosening slightly.

Cas grabbed his pistol at the same time as she twisted away. Her canvas prisoner smock ripped, but her captor's hands slipped away. She cocked the hammer, aiming at him. Someone grabbed her from behind before she could shoot. A fist bashed her hand, knocking the pistol out of her grip, and she found herself spun around and slammed into the wall.

The glowering face of the captain closed in, inches from hers, his anger like a wave breaking over her. He had dark brown eyes, but his brow was drawn down so far, the irises were barely visible. He leaned into her ribs so hard, she feared they would bend—or break. Somehow, her feet were dangling off the ground again. Seven gods, she hated being short.

"Do not make trouble, girl," he breathed, the scent of alcohol washing her face.

She wished she could lean away, but the wall didn't help her out. "Sorry," she grumbled as fiercely as she could with her ribs shoved into her organs, "I didn't know you were used to compliant prisoners."

"Just ones not stupid enough to attack their guards." He leaned even closer and grabbed her chin, his fingers hard as they dug into flesh tender with bruises. Her barely healed lip cracked open again and bled. She hoped it would stain his stupid bone vest. Not that he would care. It probably wouldn't be the first blood to splash upon it. "If you think I'm afraid to go against the Deathmaker's wishes," he breathed in her ear, "you're wrong. It wouldn't be the first time."

Cas hadn't thought that at all—wasn't he the captain and therefore in charge?—but she wasn't about to start a conversation with the lunatic. On the other hand, if he brought his ugly snout any closer, she *would* bite it off.

He released her abruptly. She managed to brace herself against the wall and kept from crumpling to the deck, though her ribs did creak with the first full breath she took. She needed to escape from these madmen—Cofah, pirates, they were all the same—just so she could heal.

The captain handed the six-shooter to the guard, who was standing nearby, wearing a sheepish expression.

"Don't lose that again," the captain said.

“No, Cap’n. I won’t.”

The second man had returned with the lantern. He lifted the shackles in the air. “Sorry, Captain. We’ll get her chained up real good.”

The captain looked into the dark room. “What is he thinking, putting her in there? Make sure she can’t touch anything.” He glared at Cas again, and she was certain he would have preferred to tie her in twenty or thirty layers of rope and pin her under a five-hundred-pound anchor.

“Yes, Cap’n.”

Grumbling under his breath, the captain pushed past the guards and strode down the narrow corridor.

“You first,” the closest guard said. “You’ve got the lantern.”

The man grimaced, but took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold. The second guard pushed Cas ahead of him.

The single lantern wasn’t strong enough to illuminate everything—it was a surprisingly big cabin, or maybe a bulkhead had been removed to turn two rooms into one—but it did give the sense of a space packed with built-in tables, counters, and cabinets with glass fronts. Behind that glass lay all manner of books and scrolls, strange tools and quirky gadgets, chemicals in jars, powders in tins, and mysterious substances in clear vials. Bundles of drying grasses, roots, and leaves dangled on twine from the ceiling, and the whole place smelled of chemicals and herbs. All manner of goggles and magnifying devices hung on a pegboard—Cas tried not to find it creepy that hairy tufts that looked suspiciously like scalps were pinned there too. Crates secured to the floor with bolts held metal scrap, and a few mechanical insect-like contraptions rested on the top. Something moved in one of several terrariums along the wall, and she was relieved the lantern wasn’t bright enough to show what exactly.

“Put her in the corner?” One guard pointed to the shadowy end of the cabin. The hammock and clothing trunk there appeared out of place in the laboratory.

“Yeah, we’ll chain her to that pipe.”

Her body too achy to protest further, Cas let them guide her into the corner. Had they been considerate, they might have let her climb into the hammock, but they pushed her to the floor and shackled her to a pipe that ran vertically through the corner.

“Stay out of trouble, girl.” One of the guards patted her on the cheek with all the love of a polar bear smacking a fish out of the water, then they both headed for the door.

“You could leave the lantern,” she said, then, because they had no reason to want to please her, added, “so I’ll have time to look at all this strangeness and grow more and more scared.”

The pirate with the lantern snorted. “I reckon that’ll happen even more in the dark.” He paused in the doorway, and Cas thought some random bit of sympathy might bubble to the surface. But he only glared at her and said, “I lost a friend in that fight last summer. I hope Deathmaker’s got a special treat planned for you.”

The door slammed shut, leaving her alone in the dark.

No, not entirely alone. Something was slithering around in that terrarium. She hoped it wasn’t venomous. And that it couldn’t get out.

She shifted around, trying to find a comfortable space on the floor, but even if there had been one, her throbbing wounds would have precluded relaxation. Lumps and bruises she had been able to forget about while they were running and fighting refused to be ignored any longer. The guards hadn’t given her much slack, so she ended up sitting, cross-legged and facing the corner, her forehead leaning against the pipe.

The engine started up somewhere below her, the vibrations humming through the deck. In a few more minutes, they would be off, and there would be nowhere to escape to, even if she could manage it. The Roaming Curse had an aerial outpost out there somewhere over the ocean, and she guessed that was their next destination. Or maybe they were heading straight to Iskandia to set up that trap.

If she were the one to cause Colonel Zirkander’s death, she would never forgive herself. He had been one of the few people to trust her, to have faith in her. She owed him every award she had won in her short career—and a lot of laughs too.

Cas blinked, trying to fight back tears. They hadn’t threatened when there were witnesses, but here in the dark, it was hard to keep up that shield of toughness.

A doe can stumble and die, a hunter’s arrow in its side, without ever having felt sorry for itself. That was one of her father’s quotes. He had never been one to accept self-pity or any other sign of weakness, not from himself, and not from his daughter, either. He had hugged her and said nothing about her crying at her mother’s funeral, but that had been the last time he had condoned tears. She had been five then.

. . . . .

Though Port Ariason was several miles from the fortress, Tolemek stuck to the jungle paths rather than venturing into the streets, their corners illuminated with gas lamps. On the way back from his errand, he skirted the town until he reached the southern end where sailing ships and steamers were docked in the harbor. Past them, an oblong shape blotted out the stars over the horizon, though little else suggested a ship was up there. There wasn’t a single lamp burning above decks, nothing to give them away in the distance. With the

wooden craft painted black and the envelope made from a similarly dark material, the *Hunter* sailed the skies with impunity on dark nights.

Given the proximity of the fortress and the local garrison, the lightless profile was a wise choice. The Roaming Curse had a reputation grisly enough that most Cofah army commanders looked the other way rather than tangling with them, but if the pirates made a spectacle of themselves, then the military was forced to take action.

Tolemek hoped Captain "Slaughter" Goroth had gone along with his wishes, giving Ahn a spot in his cabin rather than one of the dingy cells near the engine room. It was hot and cramped down there, and there were no portholes. Whatever army she was a part of, she had helped him escape, and he owed her something for that.

He had been on the verge of ordering her released when Malbet had blabbed. Once Goroth knew who he had, there was no way he would let her go. And Tolemek owed him too much to go against his wishes. But if they could, as he had suggested, use her to trap Zirkander, then she need never be harmed. As much as Goroth hated all things Wolf Squadron, he would surely see the benefit of releasing her to gain the greater prize.

Despite these thoughts, Tolemek quickened his step as he approached the airship. Though he trusted Goroth, he couldn't be sure he wouldn't take out some frustrations on Ahn. Tolemek wouldn't have left her, but he had promised that boy his gold coin. He had found the youth, shivering beneath the pilings of one of the long piers that stretched to the harbor's lighthouse. It was the meeting spot they had agreed to. Not only had the boy been forced to take a swim, but he'd been shot in the arm. He had been poor enough that he hadn't protested his injury one bit, merely thanking Tolemek profusely for the coin and running off, but that had only made Tolemek feel guilty. He had risked that boy's life, and for what? His research had been wrong. No, not wrong, but conducted far too late to matter. All he had gotten out of his stay in the fortress was a beating and... a burden he wasn't sure he wanted.

"That you, sir?" a soft voice asked from behind the tree the *Hunter* was anchored to, its dark form floating a few feet away from the top of the stout palm.

"It's me."

One of the cabin boys stepped into view and offered a rope. "You're the last one out, sir."

"Good. Follow me up." Tolemek climbed the knotted rope, his battered body protesting the exertion after the night he'd had. He wondered how Ahn had managed the climb. Judging by the visible bruises, she had received more beatings than he had. He wondered

how long she had been a prisoner of war before being deposited at Dragon Spit. He wondered a lot of things about her, foremost among them, whether she would talk to him again.

"That shouldn't matter," he muttered. "You've barely known her a few hours."

"What, sir?" the cabin boy asked.

"Nothing. Just scheming up my next concoction." Though he hadn't used any of his "concoctions" on any of the pirates since Goroth took over three years ago, rumors never stopped flying, and Tolemek found that he could stop all questions pointed in his direction by making such a statement.

Indeed, the boy's gulp was audible, followed by utter silence.

A guard waited at the top, but only nodded when Tolemek climbed aboard. He crossed the dark deck, not needing any lights to navigate the familiar terrain—Goroth had ordered this new ship designed after the same model as the one Wolf Squadron had destroyed the summer before—and headed for the stairs to the officers' deck. He wanted to go straight to his cabin and check on Ahn, but Goroth's door opened as he passed, as if he had been listening for Tolemek. Maybe he had been.

"Come have a drink with me, Mek."

The cabin smelled of brandy; it seemed the captain had already had a few drinks.

"My prisoner being treated well?" Tolemek asked.

"Well enough. This is a pirate ship, not a passenger steamer." Goroth shut the door, waved to one of the benches bolted to the wall, then sat at his own desk. "The boys chained her in there, so she wouldn't bother your work. I'd leave her that way if I were you. Or put her in one of the cells. You'll sleep easier that way. I walked in on her about a half a second away from shooting Bloodnose and escaping, not five minutes after she was brought on board. She may not look like a big cannon, but she'll be trouble."

"Yes, I've seen her shoot."

"Listen, Mek." The captain grabbed a brandy glass from his bar, wiped it clean with his shirt, then poured the amber liquid. "I like the idea of setting a trap with her, but nobody knows where Zirkander is right now. He hasn't been leading his squadron of late. Does she know where he is?" He lifted his brows and handed Tolemek the glass.

"I haven't asked. I will."

"You ask her about the flier power sources at all? Those are worth a fortune, and maybe if you got one, you could figure out how to use it. Then sell the information to the government. Or we could make our *own* fliers and use them for raids. We'd be untouchable. She say anything about them?"

“No.” Tolemek sipped from the glass and searched for a political way to tell Goroth that he could be talking to her about these things now, if he would let him go.

“What were you doing down there for hours? Flirting?”

“Escaping.”

“Fine, but I want answers now. Before we reach the outpost tomorrow. If you don’t question her, *I* will.” Goroth’s gaze drifted to a cat o’ nine tails hanging on the wall. “But you know I’d like that. And have a hard time stopping.” His hand tightened around his own brandy glass. “I’d have no trouble shipping her head in a box to Zirkander’s office.”

“I will speak to her,” Tolemek said, keeping his voice calm, though he didn’t appreciate the threat.

“I know you won’t interrogate her, but speak to her with that truth serum of yours. I want real answers, not lies.”

Tolemek set his jaw. It wasn’t a bad idea, but he didn’t appreciate being told how to handle *his* prisoner. “Yes, Captain,” was all he said. He finished his brandy, the liquid burning down his throat, and stood. “I’ll begin now, if you need nothing further from me.”

“Mek,” the captain said, his tone softer, almost apologetic. “Did you find what you were looking for down in that dungeon?”

“No. Whatever scrolls and books were once there had been burned.”

“Too bad. It’s your project, not mine, but I’d give a lot for the treasures—the power—those sorcerers once wielded.”

“I know.” Tolemek headed for the door. He didn’t want to discuss the topic further. Goroth believed he sought the ancient magic to make his experiments more powerful, and that was something “Captain Slaughter” could support. If he knew the truth, he might become an obstacle rather than an ally. Or even competition. What Tolemek sought was invaluable, especially to one who could use it.

“Mek? Be careful with her. She’s Iskandian. She’ll know about Tanglewood. She’ll shoot you the second she has a chance.”

Except she hadn’t. Tolemek walked out, closing the door behind him.

Chapter 5

Cas wasn't sure how much time had passed, but she dozed at some point, weariness finally catching up with her. When the door opened, she woke with a jerk, her shackles clanking against the pipe. Voices sounded in the hallway, a part of some quiet conversation. She turned her head toward the light, hoping one of her captors was bringing food. Her stomach was as empty as her soul.

Tolemek walked in, carrying a lantern. He looked around the room for a moment, then spotted her under the hammock. His lips thinned, then he held up a finger and walked out again. He returned after a moment with a key ring. He stopped only long enough to light a few more lamps from the one in his hand, then knelt in front of her. He unlocked the shackles, but paused before standing up, lifting a finger to her chin.

A gentle gesture, but Cas wasn't sure how she felt about having him touch her—was that the hand he used to pet his snakes? She glanced at the terrarium.

"Someone hit you?" he asked, then backed away so she could stand up. "Someone here?"

She opted for staying on the floor. This corner was less odd than the others, and something about having the clothing trunk on one side and the hammock dangling overhead made her feel protected, like a child in a fort that adults were too big to breach. An illusion, of course, but she leaned her back against the pipe and stayed there anyway.

"Not exactly," she said—he was regarding her steadily, waiting for an answer. "I tried to take advantage of a guard's inattentiveness to arm myself." No need to mention that she would have shot the man and anyone else in her path to the exit if she could have managed it. "There were repercussions."

"Hm."

Tolemek walked over to a counter, unlatched a cupboard below, and pulled out a bowl and a pitcher with a tight lid. Everything in the cabin looked like it was secured, at least somewhat, as things would be on a sailing ship where the pitches of the waves were a constant.

The pirates had to be ready for battle at any time, she supposed. Tolemek poured water, dipped a rag in it, then grabbed a small ceramic jar from one of his cabinets.

"Would you like to sit in a chair?" He waved at one at a desk with a lamp on it, then held up the rag. "I'll be able to see what I'm doing."

"Are you a doctor qualified to treat patients?" Cas made a point of looking around the laboratory. "The stories pin you as more of a mad scientist."

"Mad?" Tolemek arched his brows.

"Something has to explain that hair."

He blinked a few times, then surprised her by laughing. It was a pleasant sound that didn't seem to fit with the macabre laboratory surroundings, but she could only stare at him, not finding humor in the situation, or in the entire day. Make that the entire month.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't think you would talk to me at all, and here you are, as genial as ever."

"If having girls insult you is what you consider genial, then you're spending too much time with the wrong kinds of people."

His lips quirked upward. "Tell me about it." Tolemek pulled the chair out from the desk and brushed off the seat, though she didn't see any crumbs or dust on it. He opened his palm toward it again. "To answer your question, I'm mostly self-taught, with a lot of my education coming through books and experimentation, but I was sent to the field medic course when I was in the army."

Cas struggled not to shudder at what qualified as "experimentation" for him.

"I can get the sawbones if you prefer, but he *does* live up to his name."

"Yeah? Is that where the captain's finger bone chest protector came from?"

"I believe he traded a bottle of brandy to a South Isles cannibal for that a few years ago."

Cas snorted. She bet that story wasn't widely known. "I'm fine." She waved away his offer of help in favor of hunkering in her corner. "I don't need any attention, medical or otherwise." The dried blood on her chin probably said otherwise, but she didn't want to cozy up with the Deathmaker. They'd bonded enough during their escape. More than enough.

Tolemek, the rag and jar in his hands, looked disappointed at her response, but he inclined his head and said, "Very well. Let me know if you change your mind."

Strange. Did he actually care? Back in the jungle, she'd had the sense, just for a moment, that he had planned to let her go, or at least that he had been thinking about it. She had assumed it was her

imagination, but maybe it hadn't been. Of course, he might simply be choosing to be nice to make her more amenable to answering questions. Either way, maybe *she* should be nice, or at least not spiteful, so he would see her as more of a human being rather than a recalcitrant prisoner. Maybe she could make him trust her a little, enough to say... leave her unshackled the next time he left the room? Though some of the things in his laboratory made her as uneasy as a flier engine with a suspicious rattle, she wagered there were all sorts of items that might be helpful in an escape. Maybe he had some of those smoking leather balls in a box somewhere. And who knew? Maybe she could get some useful intelligence out of him, something to bring back home with her.

Tolemek had laid the implements on the desk and taken a seat. He was stroking his goatee thoughtfully.

"Sorry," Cas said, "you were trying to help. I get it. I'll ah—" she pointed to the rag, "—take your treatment. Thanks."

Words were one thing, but actions were another. Her body had stiffened while she sat on the floor, and she sucked in a pained breath at her first attempt to roll to her knees and stand.

Tolemek crossed the cabin in three strides and helped her up.

"Didn't think I was old enough to get that stiff," she said. She pretended to stumble—she didn't have to do much pretending—and gave herself an opportunity to take a quick look at the lower shelves of a bookcase she had noticed earlier, one with a glass cover protecting the contents. All manner of vials hung in racks inside, and a couple looked familiar.

Tolemek slipped an arm around her waist to help her to the chair. She straightened up, not wanting him to notice her spying, and leaned against his side. The support wasn't unwelcome, though she probably should have pushed his arm away. One didn't ask for support from the Deathmaker, right? But she was being nice, wasn't she? To fool him? Just as he was trying to fool her by being a gentleman? She had barely started this new game, and her head already hurt. She was too simple for the intricacies of mind games and spy missions; she just wanted to fly and shoot things.

"I don't think there's any age where beatings feel good." Tolemek guided her into the chair, then pulled up a stool. He pushed the lamp closer to her face, and she could feel its warmth. The pirate ship wasn't cold—they were still in the tropics, after all—but the canvas bag she was wearing left far too much arm and leg bare for her taste.

"Probably not. Would you mind taking those spikes off your wrists before doctoring me?" She nodded toward his wrist braces—the prongs weren't razor sharp, but they certainly had an inimical look to them. "I was a little concerned I'd get perforated during our walk

across the room."

Tolemek unfastened them and tossed them on the desk. He had the same bronze skin as the rest of the Cofah, but that didn't mean he didn't tan at all, and she found herself somewhat amused by the paler three-inch bands on his wrists. The Deathmaker had tan lines. Also not mentioned in the stories that circulated.

Cas stayed still as he dabbed her face, wiping her wounds and washing away the dried blood. It stung, but he was probably more gentle than that sawbones would have been. With his face close to hers, she had the conundrum of where to look. It seemed too personal —too intimate—to watch his eyes, but it would have been awkward to lean out to look around him. She settled for staring at the shark tooth necklace, though at some point, her gaze drifted to his collarbone and then down to the pectoral muscles visible beneath his vest. She supposed, if one could get past the I-think-I'm-really-tough pirate clothing, one might consider him attractive. *She* didn't, of course, especially considering his plans for her, so she merely acknowledged that some people would.

Tolemek put down the rag and opened the ceramic jar. The grayish green color of the thick goop inside reminded her of the stuff that had been growing on the walls in those underground ruins. Its dubious scent smelled more medicinal than natural, but she wasn't sure about having it smeared on her face.

"What's that for?" she asked. "And does it have a more confidence-inspiring name than Green Goo Number Three?"

He rotated the jar so she could see the label.

"Healing Salve Number Six," she read.

"It's to assist the body in healing and also to prevent infection. There are antimicrobial compounds."

Anti-what? "Oh, good. And it's stronger than the first five iterations, I'm guessing?"

"More effective, yes."

"It's good to know—" Cas made a face when he touched the first cold, slimy dollop to a swollen cut at her temple. "Good to know some of the things you make are for helping people."

Tolemek had been focused on applying the salve, but he looked into her eyes a moment, his face inscrutable.

"It's not what your reputation is about," she said, explaining by stating the obvious. As if he wasn't aware of his reputation.

"I know," he said softly. Now he avoided her eyes, dabbing goo to her cut lip.

It seemed like there was a hint of regret about him. But maybe this was part of the game too. Pretending to be someone decent, someone who cared.

“I suppose you have to keep your pirate allies healed up, so you have help—” Cas stopped herself from saying raping, pillaging, and slaughtering, but barely. Nice prisoners that could be trusted didn’t sling such accusations around. “—on your missions,” she finished. There. Wasn’t that tactful?

“Most of them prefer the sawbones’ sketchy draughts to mine,” Tolemek said. “The army too. I tried to send them some of this compound, since it’s superior to the crude antiseptic they plied us with when I was a soldier, but knowing it was from me, they wouldn’t take it. I even tried to sell it at an exorbitant sum, so they’d be more likely to believe there was something in it for me, but the medical general said no soldier would risk using something I had made.”

“So the Cofah hate you as much as the Iskandians, huh?” Oops, so much for tact. That had been rather blunt.

And he winced. “Yes.”

“It—what they think—bothers you?”

He had finished with her face and set the jar down. “It... serves me.”

Not quite an answer to her question.

“As Gor—the captain has always been quick to point out, enemies aren’t eager to pick fights with me. They, too—” he gestured toward the ship as a whole, “—leave me alone to do my work undisturbed. Reputations aren’t always founded in truth—the captain’s breastplate, for example—but there has to be *enough* truth to make it believable. The instant someone stops believing, he’ll try to kill you for your position and for your share of the earnings.”

Plunder, Cas’s mind replaced the word.

“In addition to worrying about rival clans and armies and lawmen, you have to worry about your own allies. The captain fends off assassination attempts from within every month or two. He owns the ship and a share of the outfit, and anyone who kills him, gets his stuff. That’s what passes for law in here. It’s like the jungle. Survival of the strongest and the most cunning.”

“Why stay in such a place?” Cas thought of the support and camaraderie she got from her unit back home. After the awkward discomfort she had always experienced with her father, it had been a delight to have a different sort of family, one with dozens of brothers and sisters to work with and talk to, people who did dangerous work and formed close relationships through the experience. Just thinking about it, about them, made her chest ache with homesickness.

“There aren’t many places available to me,” Tolemek said dryly.

“*Now*. You must have made a choice somewhere along the way.”

He leaned back, propping his arm on the desk. “You mean after the unit I commanded was decimated in an airship battle with some pesky

Iskandian fliers?" He gave her a frank stare. Her first thought was that he was referring to the previous summer's battle again, but this must have been something different. He wasn't commanding anything here, was he?

"I was twenty-four and had just made captain at a ridiculously young age. My father was finally proud of me. I got orders to defend the *Starlight Sailor*, one of our greatest airships, made more so by the fact that it was carrying one of our most legendary admirals and two top diplomats to a treaty negotiation to enlist some of the jungle shamans from the south. Then, out of the clouds—" Tolemek stretched his hand toward the ceiling, fingers spread, "—comes Wolf Squadron. Somehow, they'd gotten intel about our plans and they swept in, strafing our decks with bullets, killing my men left and right. We had artillery weapons and took some of them down, but as you well know, they're good at cat-and-mouse games. The *Starlight Sailor* went down, plummeted into the ocean. The admiral, the diplomats, a decorated airship pilot... all died. There were few survivors."

Of whom, he was obviously one. His sarcastic bitterness was palpable, so she resolved to keep her mouth shut.

"For punishment, I was stripped of all my rights and privileges as an officer and discharged from the army." He lowered his arm and stared down at his hand. "There was nothing to return home to. My father said I was dead to him. I didn't know what to do or where to go. Eventually I got a letter of condolence from another former army officer, a Colonel Goroth who'd been my instructor at the officer proving grounds and who'd had a similar run-in with Wolf Squadron. He'd also been cast out of the army and had his family turn their backs on him. He'd always been a warrior at heart, even when he was teaching, and he couldn't give it up. He was a mercenary for a while but eventually became a pirate. He invited me to join him out here, and feeling like I was practically a criminal already back home, I joined him."

"Captain Slaughter?" Cas asked.

"So he eventually became."

"Look, I don't mean to be unsympathetic, but you—your people—chose this war. *My* people want to be left alone. That's all we've ever wanted. We're doing everything we can to keep our homeland."

His forehead wrinkled. "You're rebels who broke away from the empire, killing all of your rulers in the process."

"We're the native inhabitants of that continent. Your stupid rulers came and set themselves up without being asked. And all of that happened hundreds of years ago anyway. It's idiotic that your people are still wasting resources trying to get us back. If they think we'll ever be content little imperial subjects, they're delusional."

A knock sounded at the door, and Cas nearly jumped out of her seat. For a moment, she had forgotten where she was and that she was surrounded by a ship full of pirates who would happily slay her.

"Come in," Tolemek called.

"Is this all right?" Cas whispered, lifting her un-shackled arms.

Tolemek flicked his hand dismissively as the door opened. A nervous cabin boy stood there, holding a tray with plates and a carafe on it.

"Come in, boy. Set it down." Tolemek pointed to the desk.

The kid couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen. What calamity had come to *his* life to bring him here? Maybe he was some pirate's son. And here she thought *she* had been born into a disturbing family business.

"Yes, sir." The boy glanced toward the terrariums—hah, Cas wasn't the only one nervous about whatever the Deathmaker kept in there—then scurried to the desk. He set down the tray, looking like he would bolt for the door, but stopped long enough to point at one of the plates. "That one's yours, sir. Cook made you more on account of you being bigger."

"Did he." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir." *Now*, the boy bolted.

Slices of bread, fish and sauce, and an orange. There was nothing gourmet about the trays or the presentation, but Cas was hungry enough that she could have wolfed down ten or twenty of the nasty ration bars pilots took on longer missions.

After the door closed, Tolemek set the plate with the larger portion down in front of her. "If you're hungry enough to risk the cooking, I'd try that one." He put the other plate in front of him, though he didn't pick up the fork or knife.

Belatedly, it occurred to Cas to find the boy's words suspicious. "You think that one's poisoned?" She nodded to the smaller portion.

"No, they're not going to kill you. But based on a conversation I had with the captain, I wouldn't be surprised if there might be a dose of a truth serum that would encourage you to answer my questions honestly."

Huh. And he wasn't going to use it on her?

"Truth Serum Number Three?" she asked. She had never heard of such a concoction, unless one counted the honesty-encouraging effects alcohol had, but his scientific interests seemed to be broad.

"More like seventeen. Affecting the human mind in a predictable way isn't as easy as blowing things up."

"How about affecting the human body? Killing people. Is that easy?" And did she truly want to know the details?

Tolemek looked away. "Killing people isn't difficult. There are

numerous substances in the world that are poisonous to humans."

"Why seek them out? Why create something that..." Cas prodded a piece of fish with her fork. Hungry as she was, this conversation, and the fact that someone might have been playing with the food, had her worried about sampling.

"If you've ever wondered if the smith regrets forging the sword that ends up taking an innocent man's life, the answer is yes."

Cas had not wondered that, but she did now. With smiths, it would be rare for them to find out how and when their weapons had been used. Though, in making a tool for killing, there could not be much doubt that it *would* be used. A sword, after all, had no other purpose. No one blamed the smiths, she supposed, but what he had done—or, as it sounded like, allowed to be done with his work—was orders of magnitude worse. It *was*, wasn't it?

Tolemek stood up and walked across the cabin to the clothes trunk. He opened the lid and pulled out a couple of tins of sardines and packages of crackers, brought them back, and set them beside Cas's plate. "An alternative if you wish it."

"Thanks," she mumbled. The packages were Cofah, but the Iskandians had similar types of travel rations, so she believed they had come from some general mercantile—or been plunder from some ship's supplies—and were unlikely to have strange serums added to them.

"The wine is probably safe, and there's water in that pitcher. If you don't need anything else, I believe I'll get some rest. Dawn is only a couple of hours off."

He rooted in a cabinet and found a couple of blankets. He tossed one on the hammock, then spread another out on the floor. He blew out the nearest lamp and took the floor position for himself, lying down without a mention of shackles or a suggestion that she stay out of trouble and not wander off. A sign of trust? Or was he going to leave her to her own devices to see if he could trust her in the future? Belatedly, she remembered her mission had been to try and win that trust.

"Tolemek?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"My face feels better. Thanks for the salve. The Cofah army should have tried it before turning it down."

For a moment, he didn't answer, and she wondered if her compliment had seemed out of character, and he knew she was trying to win him over. It was the truth though, even if she wouldn't normally have admitted it. Whatever his salve was exactly, it was doing more than disinfecting wounds. Already, a cool tingling had replaced the pain in her face, and the swelling seemed less extreme.

"You're welcome," he finally said. "You're the first woman who's expressed appreciation for one of my formulas."

"Do women usually show up on your doorstep all bruised and battered and in *need* of one of your formulas?"

"They don't show up here at all," Tolemek said drily. "But when I've sought them out, they've usually been alarmed by my reputation and my work—my *passion*." He said the last in a whisper, an ache in his voice. "Of course, every now and then, one is unsettlingly intrigued. Like she relishes the idea of having her own pet monster." His tone grew dry again when he added, "I already have that relationship with Goroth."

Cas didn't know what to say to that. Monsters weren't supposed to know they were monsters, were they? Her father certainly never saw himself that way, as far as she knew.

Tolemek rolled onto his side, turning his back to her, so he must not expect a response. Or maybe he felt he had shared too much of himself. Cas could understand that. She didn't talk much about her own demons with others. What could be gained from it? Some things were just better kept to oneself.

She peeled open one of the sardine cans and ripped into a package of crackers. Maybe if she were good tonight, Tolemek would be less wary tomorrow. But how long did she have to escape? If she didn't take the first opportunity, would she regret it later, as she had in the jungle?

After she finished eating, she picked up the jar of salve. Tolemek's back was still to her. She swiped out some of the goo, stuck her hand under the baggy prison tunic, and dabbed at her other injuries.

Tonight she would rest, rest and heal. Tomorrow, she would think of escape, or if not escape—for where could she go from here?—sabotage. She eyed that lower bookcase, reminding herself to investigate it as soon as she had a chance. Crashing the airship might be extreme, but there were other ways to cause trouble. She smirked at the idea of bringing the craft into an Iskandian port while all of the pirates were sleeping. Nothing but a fantasy, she supposed, but surely she could come up with *something* to do. Even if she could just find a way to send a warning to Zirkander, that would be helpful. Then he could find a way to turn the trap on pirates.

. . . . .

Tolemek stood on the deck next to the helmsman, his hands clasped behind his back, the wind whipping his hair around. A dense fog hung over the sea ahead. He couldn't see through it, but he knew it was a man-made phenomenon rather than a natural one. He ought to know. With the help of an engineering friend, he'd invented the machine that

made it. To someone in the distance, it appeared more like clouds than fog, and certainly not like anything that could hide a flying pirate outpost with the capacity to hold a thousand men and several docked ships at one time. Only those with the coordinates, coordinates that changed every month, could find the stronghold.

"You get any information out of her?" the captain asked, coming up beside him.

"Good morning to you, also, Captain."

"Morning was four hours ago. Tired after the night's activities, were you?" Goroth smirked at him.

Odd how long they'd known each other and how little Goroth truly knew about him. They had shared more as instructor and student back at the proving grounds than they had in the six years they had been flying together. But that had been a different world, one where trust was the norm rather than the aberration. He considered Goroth a friend and was closer to him than most others here, but not a confidant.

"They were grueling," Tolemek said.

Let Goroth think what he wanted of that. In truth, that conversation with Ahn *had* worn him out. He had wanted to give her enough of himself that she started to believe he was trustworthy, or at least that whatever plans he might have for Zirkander, he would try to keep her safe, but he had shared more than he intended. Oh, his military record was on public file with the Cofah, and there were any number of pirates who knew who he had been before he was the Deathmaker, but her questions about the people who had died because of his toxic inhalant, he wasn't sure why he had answered them. Because she hadn't been afraid of his laboratory and his work and she had talked to him like a human being? Or because he simply hadn't had anyone to speak honestly with for so long? It was a strange world that he'd come to be in, one where one could talk more openly with one's enemies than with one's friends.

"She still sleeping?" Goroth asked.

"Yes."

"Still chained up, right?" Goroth's eyes narrowed. "Most people would be afraid to touch any of your concoctions in there, but she'll be desperate, and I know you have things that could make trouble for us in the wrong hands."

In the wrong hands. Odd how right and wrong had different meanings depending on a man's perceptions and world view.

"She's chained in the corner, yes."

Initially, Tolemek had let her rest without restraint, knowing he would sleep lightly with someone else in the cabin, and trusting that he would hear if she started rummaging around. Besides, he had a few

booby traps protecting the truly dangerous mixtures. But that morning, when he had woken to find her slumbering in his hammock, arms and legs flung about in a position that only a monkey could find comfortable, he had checked her hands and found a vial tucked in one. Brown Goo Number Three. He'd been more amused than annoyed —she was a prisoner; what could he expect?—and had plucked it from her grip without waking her. He had also shackled the wrist closest to the pipe again, leaving food, water, and a chamber pot within reach. The ship was already cruising into the fog bank, and he wasn't sure when he would get back to check on her. Goroth usually dragged him to meetings with other captains whenever they docked. In part because Tolemek could contribute, but probably more as a status symbol. Some of the captains had bodyguards; Goroth had the Deathmaker.

"You ask her about the energy sources?" Goroth asked.

"She doesn't know where they come from or how they're made." And all right, he hadn't asked, but Tolemek doubted a young lieutenant would know about something that had to be top secret over in Iskandia, judging by how little the rest of the world had managed to figure out in the three decades those fliers had been in the sky.

"How about secrets related to Zirkander? Anything we can use against him?"

"She's been close-mouthed anytime I've mentioned him. She won't betray him, I sense."

"Willingly, you mean," Goroth said. "Didn't she eat the food I had Cook send?"

"No, she was suspicious of it."

Goroth slapped a hand down on the black railing, startling the helmsman a few feet away. "No wonder you didn't get anything useful out of her."

"She'll have to eat eventually."

"Your patience is admirable and annoying," Goroth said.

"Thank you."

He pointed a finger at Tolemek's nose. "If the truth serum doesn't work, we'll need to try a more direct method of interrogating her. I know you don't like to torture girls, but she's Iskandian scum, and she doesn't deserve the gentlemanly treatment."

"I wasn't aware being chained in a hammock was gentlemanly treatment."

"You know what I'm talking about. Don't let her sexy little prisoner smock dull your senses, Mek."

Tolemek snorted. That canvas bag she was wearing was about as sexy as a box. If he had any better clothes to offer her, he would have done so. He hoped to find something on the outpost that at least fit

her. There were enough female pirates that there ought to be a little shop somewhere.

Goroth clasped his forearm. “If we get Zirkander, you could take his head back to the emperor. Maybe it would earn you the redemption you always wanted.”

“I have given up on that dream. Camp Eveningson was to Cofahre what Tanglewood was to Iskandia. Those prison guards and their cudgels were extremely excited to see me.” Tolemek rubbed his ribs at the memory. He never had figured out who had leaked his name as the person responsible for all of those deaths, even if someone else had used his aerosol, but there were ears aplenty on a pirate ship, and any man might have wanted to see trouble come to him. Or maybe the governments had simply studied the remains, known of his work, and figured it out on their own.

“Administrations change,” Goroth said softly, “and memories fade. Delivering Zirkander would go a long way toward softening their attitudes toward you. And if, before killing him, we could extract information on the energy supplies, that would be an even greater gift that might be offered up. Your lieutenant might not know anything about where they come from, but I can’t believe the same would be true for Iskandia’s great pilot hero.” His lips twisted as he said this last. One man’s hero was another’s mortal enemy.

“And what will you seek should we successfully kill Zirkander? Your old job back at the proving grounds?”

Goroth released his arm and chuckled. “No, this life suits me. There’s nothing left for me back there. This is home—” he extended a hand toward the deck of the ship, now wreathed by the thick fog. “For me... it’s just personal. You know that.”

Tolemek nodded and repeated, “I’ll work on her tonight.” Maybe he could extract some information about Zirkander from her, enough to satisfy Goroth, without resorting to potions or anything that would lessen her opinion of him.

He sighed, wondering when that had started to matter. He hadn’t even known the girl a full day yet.

“Outpost, ho,” the watchman called from the crow’s nest near the base of the balloon.

After a few more seconds, Tolemek could see it for himself, the long flying airbase, with six massive envelopes keeping it aloft, five thousand feet over the ocean, along with massive steam-powered propellers that buzzed beneath each corner. Nearby, chimneys wafted smoke into the sky, smoke that blended with the fog, disappearing in the miasma. More propellers lay dormant at the back and the sides of the long platform, those needed only for repositioning.

As the airship glided toward a docking station, Tolemek spotted

something unusual among the warehouses, shops, taverns, and hostels: a bronze aircraft with wings. It was sitting on a landing pad near the front of the outpost. At his side, Goroth sucked in a breath.

"Who caught a dragon flier?"

"And does it have a power source intact?" Tolemek mused. He had heard of the Cofah salvaging a few and secreting them away for study, but he would love to have one of his own to examine, or at least access to one.

"We'll have to find out. Looks like an older model." Goroth lifted the collapsible spyglass he always wore around his neck and extended it. "Yes, there's rust on those bolts, and seaweed dangling from the wings. Wonder where they found her?"

"How old of a model? I wonder if it might be Lieutenant Ahn's flier? It sounded like she was a prisoner on a Cofah ship for a couple of weeks before being brought to Dragon Spit. Must have gone down over the sea."

Goroth was already shaking his head. "Haven't seen one that old in the sky for twenty years. That's one of their earlier models. Ah, but is that...?" He took a few steps, leaning to see around some post in his way. "Yes, it is. There's an energy source glowing in the back. There are a couple of hulks guarding the craft, but I'm surprised someone hasn't plucked that out yet to study." He turned a speculative look on Tolemek. "I wonder what you could do with one of those."

Tolemek smiled. "So do I."

Goroth collapsed his spyglass. "Let's go see who found it and if it's available for trade."

A soft jolt ran through the ship. Two men lowered a gangplank. The docking slips were level with the rest of the outpost, so nobody had to climb a rope to get in and out of the craft this time.

A young pirate called out, "We're all secured, Cap'n."

"You calling shore leave, Cap'n?" the helmsman asked.

"We'll see. I—"

"Captain?" a cabin boy called from the gangplank. "Messenger here to see you. Captain Rolostrek sent him."

"Word of our arrival got out fast," Goroth mused. "Or maybe someone's calling a captains' meeting and inviting everyone." He nodded toward the other slips, where six other airships were already docked. The Roaming Curse was one of the biggest outfits in the Targenian Sea, maybe in the world, and Tolemek was reminded of that whenever they returned to the outpost. "Must be some big news."

"Will you share our own news?" Tolemek asked carefully. He didn't want to threaten Goroth on this, but he didn't want hundreds of pirates knowing they had a member of Wolf Squadron on board, either. Not everyone would be swayed the way Goroth had been, to

keep her alive in hopes of catching bigger prey. There were other ships in the outfit that had tangled with those dragon fliers, and any crewman would be happy to see an Iskandian pilot dead.

"No, I'm not sharing anything with any of them." Goroth pointed a finger at Tolemek's chest and then at his own. "You and I will handle Zirkander together and keep all the reward that comes with taking that risk."

Not exactly what Tolemek cared about, but he nodded. "Good."

"Now, let's go see what all the fuss is about, eh?"

Chapter 6

When Cas woke up, muted daylight flowed in through a porthole near the hammock. She remembered where she was immediately and opened her hand to check for the vial she had fallen asleep clutching. A chain rattled. She wasn't surprised to see her wrist attached to that pipe again, though it did make her uncomfortable to know Tolemek had done that without waking her. She must have been sleeping hard after being up so late, and after being stuck in such unpleasant accommodations for so long. Odd, all things considered, but she had slept better here than she had in weeks.

The blanket on the floor had been picked up, and Tolemek was gone. So was the vial she had been holding. Somehow she doubted she had simply dropped it on the floor, but she peered beneath the hammock just in case. Nothing there. No, he must have found it and extracted it from her grip. That wasn't surprising, either, though again she felt sheepish at having slept through that. Oh, well. That had been her decoy theft. She tugged up her canvas smock and dug into her underwear, hoping he hadn't presumed to search there. Surely, she would have woken up for *that*.

Her fingers found the hard glass tube, and she grinned.

Now, she had to hope her guess from the night before had been correct. The lamps had been out, with Tolemek's breathing soft and even, when she had crawled out of the hammock to poke around. Earlier in the evening, when she had "stumbled" and peeked inside the display case, she hadn't been able to see the labels of the vials in the rack. It had only been the presence of a little canvas pouch, one identical to the one she had helped knock from the prison roof, that had made her think the brown substance in the vials might be the same brown substance he had used on the hinges and the wall. But now, with light coming in the window, she squinted to read the label's small print. And grinned again. Brown Goo Number Three.

Cas sat up in the hammock, swaying softly and carefully removed the glass cap. She didn't know if the stuff would burn skin, but she didn't want to chance it. Remembering how little it had taken to blow out that wall, she tipped the vial ever so slightly, touching the mouth

to the chain securing her to the wall. Unfortunately, the goo was dense enough that gravity didn't do anything to it. She tipped the vial farther. Nothing happened. Tolemek had used a brush, hadn't he? She hadn't thought to pat around for one of those during her nocturnal pillaging.

She eyed the woven strands of the hammock. He had used a special brush, probably something designed to withstand the goo. Well, she could only use what was close to her, which wasn't much. She capped the vial long enough to pick apart a piece of the hammock, a task that involved liberal use of her teeth. She wondered what her father would think of his sniper-trained daughter, chewing apart hammocks to win her freedom. Enh, what did it matter? He hadn't talked to her in years.

Leaning back, Cas plucked a piece of twine from her teeth and dipped it into the goo. It started smoking immediately.

"Uh oh."

She dabbed it against the chain, smearing it all around near the point where it met with her shackle. The rope didn't burst into flame, but it did disintegrate even as she used it as a brush. She let go before the goo, or anything the goo had touched, could reach her fingers. She hoped it wouldn't burn a hole through the floor—now wouldn't *that* be interesting to explain to the downstairs neighbor? Fortunately, the chain was smoking now too. She held her breath, watching smoke rise and crinkling her nose at the burning hair smell that came with it. Or maybe that was burning hammock.

Cas only managed about twenty seconds of patience before tugging at the chain. It snapped as if it were made of the weakest thread instead of solid iron.

"Nice," she purred, climbing out of the hammock.

The rope she had dropped had disintegrated, but the goo seemed to have used itself up in the effort, for the floor itself wasn't smoking. Good. She had much to do before anyone noticed she had freed herself.

Curious about the diffused light coming through the porthole, Cas padded over to look outside. A dense fog hugged the sky. She pressed her cheek to the hull, peering in both directions. To the right, there was nothing except the bulbous outline of the envelope high overhead, but to the left... she sucked in a breath.

"What is *that*?"

Nothing less than a small city stretched away beneath the fog. A floating city, she realized, seeing the way the end dropped away, like the runway atop the butte back home.

"The Roaming Curse's headquarters." It had to be. She had heard rumors of a floating station out here above the ocean, but as far as she

knew, nobody had ever found it, at least nobody who wasn't supposed to find it. "Fascinating." She would have to find a logbook to get the coordinates to take back home. As soon as she figured out how to *get* back home.

She walked around Tolemek's cabin, doing a lot of looking but not much touching. He hadn't warned her about anything, but he had been assuming she would spend the day chained to the pipe. Last night, when she had felt her way into that case in the dark, she had been worried about booby traps, and that fear hadn't disappeared entirely. She would prefer a nice pistol, bow, or even a blowgun to his strange concoctions. But she *did* have a use in mind for the brown goo. She had already stuck the cap on the vial and slipped it back into her underwear. Not the ideal place to store something so caustic, but her prison garb lacked pockets. A Cofah oversight, no doubt.

"Ah ha," she murmured after lifting the lid to the clothing trunk. In addition to more of those black trousers and muscle-displaying vests of his, he had a pistol belt at the bottom, complete with pistols and ammunition. "Tolemek, dear, did you *want* me to escape?"

Telling herself it was a little early to get cocky—even if she got off the ship, she was still on a pirate stronghold—she fastened the belt to her waist, bolstered by the weight of the pistols hanging from either hip. She headed for the door and pressed an ear to the wood, wondering if Tolemek had left a guard. She didn't hear anything, but that didn't mean much.

Cas drummed her fingers on the ivory hilt of one of the six-shooters. She trusted she could open the door and take down a guard before he could get a weapon out to attack her, but a gunshot would be heard all over the ship. Some of the men might have disembarked to visit the outpost, but there was no way the place would be entirely empty.

She eyed the laboratory again, found herself more daunted than inspired by all of the paraphernalia, and settled for a simple idea. She cut down the hammock and, after some fiddling, made it into a net of sorts. She strung it over the door. With some wire, she fashioned a way to pull it down from a few feet away.

"Going to a lot of work if there's nobody out there," she muttered, aware of the time. She wondered how long the ship had been docked before she had awoken. More specifically, she wondered how long she had before Tolemek or someone else returned to check on her. Explaining why she was cutting up his hammock would be difficult.

Once she had her trap placed, Cas grabbed a few of the metal scraps out of one of the crates. She found a spot she liked in a dark corner near the door, then tossed the pieces into the air. They landed with a clatter she trusted would be audible to someone in the hallway.

By this point, she had convinced herself she been wasting her time, so she was almost surprised when the door opened. A pirate strode in, his hand on a pistol.

Cas tugged on her tripwire. The hammock-turned-net fell onto him. It wasn't a particularly insidious trap, but it did its job of confusing him for a second. She slipped in behind him, pressing one of the pistols to the back of his neck.

"Stop moving," she whispered.

He halted.

"Good man." Or boy. He didn't look more than sixteen. "Take a step forward, please." She pressed harder with the pistol's muzzle, in case her words weren't convincing in and of themselves.

When he did so, she kicked the door shut. She wanted to relieve the pirate of his weapons—there was a short sword on his belt in addition to the pistol in his hand—but her net was a barrier for her as well as for him.

"Holster that firearm, and drop your trousers," Cas said.

For the first time, the boy balked. "What? I'm not—"

"Listen," she whispered, rising to her tiptoes and leaning close to speak right behind his ear. "I am an Iskandian soldier, and it's my duty to take down thieves, bandits, pirates, and anyone else who might be a threat to my nation. I will be *more* than happy to shoot you." It was hard to sound steely and menacing at twenty-three years old and five-foot-nothing, but she managed to convince the kid she was serious.

He holstered the pistol and unclasped his belt. His trousers fell to the ground. Cas caught the pistol before it dropped too far, though she was out of hands and had to let the sword clank to the deck.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Me? Nothing, if you cooperate. I just want to get out of this cabin. Look around. This place is creepier than a cave full of bats on All Ghosts Eve, isn't it?"

"You got that right," the kid muttered with a shudder that seemed unfeigned. He was eyeing the terrariums. Everyone did when they came in. Maybe Cas should have taken a closer look at the creatures confined in them. Or... maybe not.

She hadn't been sure how she was going to convince the guard to effectively tie himself up so she could leave him here, but his trepidation gave her an idea.

"Take three steps forward and one to your left." Cas followed him with the gun pressed to his neck as he did so. "See that flask of the red liquid in that case?"

"Yeah."

"Remove it."

The pirate stiffened. “I’m not drinking it or anything like that. I don’t care *what* you do.”

“No, no, of course not. There’s no need for that.” Cas waited until the kid, trousers around his ankles, hobbled over to the case, opened the door, and removed the triangular flask before adding, “It’s so corrosive that it can sear your flesh to the bone if it merely touches your skin. There’s no need for you to ingest it for it to melt you into a pile of goo.”

The kid swallowed audibly. “What... should I do with it?” He stared down at his hand as if he held a rattlesnake.

“Put it on your head.”

“*What?*”

“Just the flask. I don’t want you to pour it out. In fact, I’m trusting you can stand very still so there’s no danger to you at all.”

“Look, woman.” The pirate set the flask on the nearest table. “I don’t care who you are. I’m not—”

While he was complaining, Cas plucked up the flask and reached up to plunk it on his head.

He cursed, his hand flying up to hold it there, though with the hammock draped over the top half of his body, he almost knocked it over. He seemed to realize that and froze there, his hand hovering in the air.

“Perfect,” Cas said, letting go. “Now, keep facing that corner there, and I’ll be back in fifteen minutes to remove it. Of course, you could try on your own, but it’s extremely full, and if you spill so much as a drop... well, I understand the Deathmaker’s potions are quite potent.”

“Yes,” the boy whispered, his hand still over his head, draped in netting, “they are.”

Cas plucked his short sword out of its scabbard and backed toward the door, the pistol aimed at him. She thought she had convinced him, but one never knew. He might chance yanking it off.

But he didn’t move, even when her heel caught on one of the pieces of metal she had dropped earlier, and it skidded across the cabin. Like a statue, he faced the corner.

Cas grabbed one of the bits of metal that had a hook-like protuberance and took it with her. She was already carrying a small pile of weapons, but one more thing shouldn’t matter. She eased the door open, checked in both directions, then stepped out. She fished the vial out and, using her mouth, tugged off the cap. Better not be too careless with this stuff, she warned herself, then dabbed the hook into the jar. It started smoldering, but she only needed it for a moment. She dabbed some of the goo into the lock on the door, hoping the mechanism would melt, and the pirate wouldn’t be able to simply walk out once he grew brave enough to risk touching that

flask. Her trap wouldn't hold him forever, but she didn't plan to be onboard that long. When she had looked out the porthole, she had spotted three other airships docked, and one of them had been little more than a personal yacht. If its owners were off enjoying the taverns and brothels, she might be able to slip aboard without being spotted.

"One step at a time," she murmured and headed for the ladder leading to the main deck. She still needed to get off *this* ship without being spotted.

. . . . .

Tolemek leaned against the wall while Goroth and several other captains and first mates settled at the big oaken table in the center of the room. A few bodyguards stood against the wall, too, but nobody came close or spoke to him.

Wenches in low-cut dresses carried trays of food and rum out of a larger common room where raucous laughs alternated with angry shouts and the sounds of smacking flesh. Gunshots had already fired once out there in the five minutes Tolemek and Goroth had been inside. A few of the captains spoke, while others shifted and sighed. One had a girl in his lap and was fondling her and suggesting that he might find something else to do if the meeting didn't start. Two seats at the head of the table remained empty.

A plump black-haired woman in an apron came in, clapped her hands, and said, "Out, ladies. The last two people have arrived."

As the servers strolled out, sashaying their hips and smiling at the men wearing more gold than others, Stone Heart, the captain of the *Burning Dragon,* walked in, accompanied by a man in a dirty, ragged Cofah military uniform. His sword was missing, and a couple weeks' worth of hair sprouted from a head that should have been shaven.

Tolemek had assumed this meeting would have something to do with the salvaged flier, but perhaps not.

"Gentlemen," Stone Heart said, walking to the head of the table. "Allow me to introduce Corporal Tyrson. He wishes to desert from the Cofah army and seeks refuge with us."

Several of the captains gave each other so-what looks. Tolemek waited for more information—Stone Heart was wearing an I-know-something-you-don't-know smirk as he massaged his shaven head. Or maybe he was scratching an itch. He had added a couple of daggers to his collection of scalp tattoos since Tolemek had seen him last.

"It seems," Stone Heart continued, after pausing long enough for dramatic effect—and to annoy people—, "our friend here is the sole survivor of an epic battle that took place high in the Iskandian Ice Blades. Given that he didn't die when his airship crashed or during the ground skirmishes, as the rest of his comrades did, he's elected not to

return home."

Goroth gave Tolemek a long look over his shoulder. Yes, Tolemek had no trouble understanding the corporal's reasoning. Even if he hadn't been in command, there would be assumptions of cowardice, and he wouldn't be looked upon favorably by his superiors.

"He was part of a secret mission," Stone Heart said, "to spy on the mines where the Iskandians are extracting the crystals that power their dragon fliers."

A number of heads lifted at that announcement, including Tolemek's. *Mines?* He had yet to see one of the energy sources up close, but he had assumed they were man-made, rather than being some natural resource.

"Guess who the Cofah airship smacked into while he was there?" Stone Heart asked.

"Who?"

"Colonel Zirkander," the soldier said, speaking for the first time. "Nobody expected him there. Turns out he was commanding the mining outpost."

Goroth gave Tolemek another look. Odd how often the man's name was coming up this week. Had Tolemek been remiss in not questioning Ahn more seriously? Was it possible she knew something about this?

"He didn't have his squadron or his fliers there though," the soldier went on, "and we had a mercenary shaman aboard, so we all figured we had the advantage. But he pulled a rusty old flier out of some forgotten crevice, and then..." The man licked his lips, and his voice lowered to a whisper. "There was a witch working with him. Or maybe even a sorcerer, like the ones from the old days. I heard the shaman talking to the captain. He seemed confident he could deal with her, until the end. They fought down in the fortress, and it was crazy. All flying sparks and lightning and blasts of power and I don't know what. You see, she had this sword. A glowing sword."

"A *soulblade*?" Tolemek asked before he could think better of showing his interest. He couldn't help himself. So much of his research had pointed to Iskandia as one of strongholds of the ancient sorcerers, but he had assumed that there would be little left but buried ruins. He hadn't dreamed there might be soulblades floating around the continent.

The soldier's brow crinkled at the term. "I don't know what it's called, but when she was holding it, it glowed and kept bullets from hitting her and, and, and she cleaved our shaman down like he was nothing. I saw it with my own eyes."

"Fantastic," one of the older captains said, his tone drier than a mouthful of sand. "Zirkander didn't have enough of an advantage.

Now he's got a witch in his back pocket."

The corporal nodded fiercely. "*That's* why we failed. If it had been just him..." He smacked a fist into his palm.

"*Why* was it just him?" Goroth asked. "Why would he have been sent to a mountain mine without his squadron?"

"Must be a secret location," one of the captains said. "And only the top, most trusted people get sent there."

"But why a pilot to command a fortress? A pilot without his squadron, at that. Surely they have other lickspittles they trust."

"Something to do with the energy sources?" Tolemek suggested. "Maybe his experience with them makes him a good candidate for locating them or interacting with them or whatever is done at this mine."

"Huh." Goroth scratched his jaw and looked at him. "If only we knew someone who might know more about Zirkander and this whole incident."

Tolemek shut his mouth and stared back. The last thing he wanted to mention in a room full of captains was that they had a Wolf Squadron pilot. His reputation might protect her on the ship, but there were people here who would risk much to do exactly what he and Goroth planned: using her to trap Zirkander. Then there were the more shortsighted people, those who would simply kill her for revenge. If his memory served, there were even bounty posters around the outpost offering rewards for the heads of particularly vexing Iskandian pilots. Ahn might not have been flying long enough to have one, but he couldn't be certain, not with that aim of hers.

Tolemek pointed at the soldier. "Would you be able to lead an airship back to those mines?"

"Yes, good question," Scarred Brea, one of the two female captains in the outfit, said. "It sounds like the Cofah ship didn't survive to report home, but their government would pay a fortune to know where the source of the energy crystals is." Brea tapped her fingers together as she gazed at the soldier. Maybe thinking of making sure he didn't change his mind and report home before some entrepreneurial pirate could sell his information first? "I'll offer you a spot on my ship."

"Wait, wait," another captain said. "I've got a spot open too. Fighter sergeant. Comes with a two percent booty share."

"Why don't you idiots see what his answer is first?" Goroth grumbled.

The corporal wore a hopeful expression, but it wilted at this pragmatism. "I *might* be able to find it. But I wasn't looking over the railing much when we were flying out there. And on the way back, I stowed away on one of their supply ships, and I was hiding in the

cargo hold for the whole trip. I don't think you can get there on foot at all. It's real high up in the mountains, and it's winter there now. Whole place is buried under snow. Also..." He shrugged. "Someone in my government already knows about the mines, too, and was pretty sure on the location. That's why they sent us. I do remember us flying around for some weeks before we found them though."

"He talks a lot, doesn't he?" Captain Brea said. "To basically say no, he can't find the place."

"Rethinking your offer?" someone asked.

Tolemek ignored the rest of the meeting, his thoughts turned inward. If Zirkander knew someone who had a soulblade, Ahn became even more valuable to him. Goroth might want to kill Zirkander, but Tolemek wanted to question him first. Or even snoop around in his home, see what information he might have on the sorcerers of old. Sorcerers who were supposed to be long dead, not fighting alongside the Iskandian military again. Even more, he wanted to question the woman with the sword. Maybe she would know where another one was. But sorcerers could read minds, so being in the room with one would be dangerous. Maybe he could get her sword somehow when she was elsewhere. Was it truly bonded to her, as the soulblades had been in ancient times? Or would it accept another handler?

He had far more questions than answers, and all he knew was he needed to find Zirkander more than ever. And he needed to talk to Ahn.

Chapter 7

Much to her chagrin, Cas hadn't been able to simply sneak off the ship. Judging by the few people below decks and the quietness of the overall craft, much of the crew had left to enjoy the outpost's facilities, but there had been too many pirates and cabin boys wandering up above for her to make it from the ship's ladder to the gangplank. For a moment, she had fantasized about a mad sprint where she shot wildly, knocking down anyone who thought to stand in her way, but that wasn't some mecca of freedom down there. If she charged off the ship, guns roaring, she'd probably be shot before she reached the end of the gangplank. Maybe sooner if Tolemek or his captain had told the other pirates in the outpost about her.

So, backup plan. She'd gone down instead of up.

From the shadows near the door, Cas eyed the engine room. There were a few portholes, but whatever fog or clouds lingered outside kept much light from seeping inside. She didn't see anyone, but there were shadows everywhere, and the engine, furnace, boilers, and bins of coal took up a lot of space. Some diligent pirate or cabin boy might be working in a nook not visible from the door. She didn't know what they would be doing though. The flywheels and pistons of the engine stood dormant, the fire in the furnace allowed to burn low. Since a lighter-than-air gas mixture kept the balloon full and the ship in the sky, the boilers only had to be heated when the propellers were needed. With the craft docked, she shouldn't have to worry about that for a while.

Cas thumbed the vial of goo as she listened for signs of life in the room. The glass was warm from being held in her hand. At some point, she needed to find some decent clothing, something with pockets perhaps.

"Later," she murmured and walked over to the engine, considering places where a little sabotage would go a long way. A fire should draw the crew down here—fires on wooden ships were never a good thing, so all hands ought to report promptly to help. That would be the time to escape.

She thought about sabotaging the boiler—she wasn't an expert on

engines but mused that she might be able to create a delayed explosion that would irrevocably damage the whole ship.

"They would really hate me then." She was a long ways from safe, and, though she hated to admit it, there was always the possibility that she would be recaptured. Better not to do something that would anger them to the extent that she became a shoot-on-sight foe instead of a capture-for-later-use one.

She paused next to a coal bin. If all she wanted was a fire...

Yes, that might do. But as long as she had the goo, she might as well do a small bit of sabotage. Something that would delay them if she managed to escape in some other ship, so that they couldn't come after her right away. She brushed some of Tolemek's concoction onto the metal bar of one of the pistons. In the shadows, she couldn't see the smoke rising, but she smelled the acrid stuff working.

She grabbed one of the lanterns by the door and set a fire in one of the metal bins. Before leaving the room, she opened a couple of portholes to let in fresh oxygen to fuel her flames. And it might prove useful to her escape attempts if some ominous black smoke poured out through the portholes as well. At the least, it should alert the men on deck to the problem sooner rather than later.

As soon as she was certain her blaze would burn without further help from her, Cas returned to the corridor. She had the problem of where to hide while people from the deck above ran down to the engine room. Tolemek's cabin would have been a logical place if she hadn't left a guard inside and melted the lock. She settled for the shadows behind the narrow metal steps leading above decks, hoping the pirates would be too busy racing to put out the fire to look closely at the spot beneath their feet.

She had barely slid into the tight space when the door banged open overhead. Heavy boots thumped on the metal steps, the heels scant inches from her nose.

"Hurry, hurry."

"Get water."

"Here, hold the door. Get a hose through here. Hurry!"

Cas pushed her back against the bulkhead, trying to blend in with it, as the boots raced toward the engine room. The pirates ran down the corridor without looking back, their eyes riveted to the door at the end. When one threw it open, an impressive amount of smoke flowed out, wreathing the closest men in gray plumes.

Two ran in, and one ran right out again, racing for the steps. Cas held her breath. With the man running this way and facing her, her hiding place didn't seem that clever.

He raced up without glancing through the steps and soon reappeared with other men and with a hose. It was busier in the

corridor than Cas had anticipated, with people running in and out of the room, some operating the hose and others fetching buckets of sand. She had to wait longer than she would have wished for the way out to be empty. When she got her moment, however brief, she left her hiding place and charged up the steps.

She ran out, hoping everyone would be below decks now—or at least extremely distracted—but she ran into a man striding toward the hatchway as soon as she sprinted out.

His eyes were shadowed by a giant-brimmed hat, but there was no mistaking his hand reaching for one of the pistols at his belt. Cas had her purloined pistols ready. She shot the weapon out of his hand before he had lifted it more than two inches from his holster, and sent a second shot *through* his hand. She could have sent it through his chest, but, again, she was concerned with doing too much damage—leaving too many bodies behind—when her escape might be unsuccessful. And, later, if she thought about it more, she might accept that she didn't particularly want to do so much that Tolemek would be furious with her. As it was, he would probably get in trouble for not restraining her in such a manner that she couldn't escape.

The pirate howled and grabbed his hand. Cas ran around him, checking the rest of the deck as she did so. Uh oh, there was one more trying to take a shot at her. She fired, lancing him through the knee. He dropped his weapon and crumpled to the deck, clutching the injury and howling as he rolled around. He was out of it for the moment, but the first man was glaring at her as much as he was gasping in pain. And those shots might have been heard by those below.

She jerked the pistol toward the hatchway. "Drop your sword and get down there. Help your friends put out the fire."

"I'm not—"

"*Now*," Cas snarled, pointing the pistol at his face.

He pulled out the sword with his good hand and dropped it, then backed toward the steps she had just left.

"In," Cas ordered.

He turned and jogged onto the steps, though he didn't start down right away. It didn't matter. Cas slammed the door shut behind him. She grabbed the sword and rammed it through the wheel that opened and closed the door, hoping that would jam it shut, at least for a time.

After once more scouring the deck with her eyes, checking for pirates and spotting none, Cas sprinted for the gangplank. She intended to charge down and to quickly disappear into the large floating outpost, but she nearly tripped over her own feet as something unexpected came into sight. She flailed to catch her balance, though a surge of vertigo hit her when she found herself

leaning over the side of the gangplank, the brilliant blue of the ocean visible through the fog. Thousands of feet below. That was one fall that she did *not* want to make.

She lurched back to a vertical position and waited until she had crossed the gangplank and her feet were on solid... pavement, if not ground, then stared to the right again. She was lower now, and buildings blocked much of her view, but she could still make out the bronze hull of a dragon flier parked on a landing pad at the end of the outpost.

"Forget the yacht," she whispered. "We're seeing if that thing flies."

Muffled gunshots came from the ship behind her. Someone trying to shoot his way through that hatch? She wasn't going to stick around to find out. She sprinted across a street that probably went all the way around the outpost and between two buildings with wood and corrugated metal sides. The floating platform itself might be a miracle of engineering, but the construction that had sprung up on it made it look like a shanty town, at least the part she was in now. She passed sturdier structures as she wove deeper into the maze, trying to parallel that main street and make her way to the flier, but she started passing more people too.

One man paused to eye her canvas prisoner's outfit. She wondered if he recognized the style. She smiled, waved, then ducked into an alley. She hid behind a pile of boxes that doubtlessly passed as a trash collection area, dropped her hands to her knees to catch her breath, and peered back the way she had come through a crack between the boxes. The man was staring down the alley in her direction. He scratched his jaw. Cas checked the ammunition in her pistols and loaded rounds to replace the ones she had spent. She had stolen enough bullets for a quick skirmish but not an all-out gunfight. The man returned to his walk. She couldn't help but wonder if her presence would be reported. She hadn't seen a mirror and wasn't sure how crazy she looked, but she doubted she looked anything like a pirate.

"Something to remedy."

Enough running around like a blind fool. She needed to slow down and figure out how to reach the flier without getting caught. And she had to assume she would need to spend time to learn if it was operational too. Even in the distance, she had been able to tell it was an older model.

"One thing at a time."

. . . . .

"I want answers," Goroth said as he and Tolemek walked back from the meeting. "I want that truth serum in her gullet, and I want to have

a long chat with her."

Tolemek kept his sigh to himself. He doubted Ahn had the knowledge Goroth sought. Depending on how long she had been in the prison and how long she had been in Cofah clutches before arriving there, she might not know anything about Zirkander's secret assignment. From that soldier's words, it sounded like this had all occurred recently. "You know where I keep it," he said.

"You're not going to help question her?"

Tolemek would prefer to be there to keep Goroth from growing overly irritated—and violent—if he didn't get the answers he wanted. "I'll help. I didn't want you to think I was impeding you." Or that more brutal methods would be required.

"I don't think that. I just think you're forgetting who she is because she's young and cute. Don't—what in all of the hells? The ship is smoking!" Goroth sprinted ahead.

Tolemek stared at the black plumes wafting from the portholes on the starboard side toward the stern—where the engine room was. His stomach went for a swim in his boots. Maybe Goroth was right. He had been too lenient, and now she had escaped and done something to the ship.

"You don't know it's her," he muttered and ran after Goroth, though he couldn't imagine what else might have happened. The Roaming Curse captains were all allies, and no other pirate outfits were allowed to dock here.

By the time he reached the end of the gangplank, no less than four men had rushed up to Goroth and were explaining the situation—or maybe making excuses—speaking a thousand words a minute. Hoses ran through the hatchway leading below decks, and a sword was randomly lying beside them.

A moan of pain came from beside Tolemek. He ran over to Grimsaw, who was sitting on the deck against the railing and struggling to tie a makeshift bandage around his knee.

"What happened?"

"That bitch shot me," he groaned.

"My—the prisoner?"

"Who else?" It was a testament to Grimsaw's distress—or pain or anger or both—that he glowered at Tolemek and answered sarcastically, forgetting his usual wariness toward the Deathmaker.

"I'll get something for your knee and find the sawbones as soon as the fire is out."

Tolemek ran for the hatchway, intending to help the men below decks, but Goroth lunged out of the group and clasped his arm.

"Your prisoner did this," he said.

"I know."

“And she’s gone.”

Tolemek frowned, though he could hardly claim to be surprised. She had probably set the fire as a distraction. But how had she escaped from his cabin to start with? He had taken that vial from her hand and left her locked up.

“Didn’t you shackle her?” Goroth demanded.

“I did, actually, and I searched her before leaving this morning.”

Goroth grumbled some choice curses under his breath, his fists clenched so hard his knuckles stood out as much as the bones on his breastplate.

“I’ll find her,” Tolemek said.

“You better. Go do it now. We’ll handle the fire.”

Tolemek hesitated, not wanting to abandon the ship if it was in danger—this was the only home he had, and all of the mixtures he had made and the ingredients he had gathered were in that cabin. He would hate to lose everything again. Not to mention his collection of pets. “Will you get my spiders and snakes out if my cabin proves to be in danger?”

“Spiders! What a thing to care about now.” Goroth looked like he wanted to punch Tolemek. Perhaps it hadn’t been the right thing to mention, but in addition to keeping them as pets, he extracted venoms for some of his work.

“Snakes too.”

“Just get the girl.”

“Very well.”

“And put her in a devils-cursed cell when you get her, not your cabin where she has access to who knows what.” Goroth flung his arm toward the smoking portholes.

A throat cleared behind them. Most of the men who had reported to the captain had run back to help with the fire. This was someone Tolemek hadn’t seen before. Clad in browns and blacks, he wore nothing resembling a uniform—and his left sleeve was tied in a knot at his elbow, showing his arm to be cut off at the joint—but there was a badge pinned to his jacket. The Roaming Curse outpost had patrol officers? Tolemek had never seen such a thing.

“Who are you?” Goroth demanded.

“Post Administrator and Port Inspector Dancun. Keeping the outpost safe for all.” The man spoke in a deadpan voice, his lips barely moving. He pointed at the smoke wafting up from the craft’s stern. “That’s a problem.”

“We’re working on it.”

“You’ll have to move away from this berth until your fire has been out for at least two hours. We can’t risk it spreading.”

The captain looked like he wanted to gnaw off a few of his own

teeth and start spitting them at the man like gunfire. “We need access to the outpost.”

“You can access it again two hours after your fire’s out.”

Goroth glanced at Tolemek, made a shooing motion, and mouthed, “Go.”

Tolemek was about to when a cabin boy strode out of the smoking corridor, walking quickly, though his eyes were riveted to something he was holding. It was the young fellow he had left outside his cabin to guard Ahn. A strange net was tangled around his shoulders. With one hand, he was holding up his trousers, and with the other he held... Odd, Tolemek recognized that flask.

“Sir,” he blurted, charging straight toward Tolemek. “I wanted to make sure you had this, and that the fire didn’t—that everything was safe.”

Feeling rather confused, Tolemek held out his hand mutely. The boy sagged in relief as soon as the flask left his fingers, then launched into an explanation. Tolemek’s silence continued as he listened and digested the information.

“Lieutenant Ahn?” the administrator asked, joining them.

Tolemek hadn’t realized the man had been listening. He frowned. The cabin boy had blurted Ahn’s name during his explanation. He hoped it wouldn’t mean anything to the port inspector. A vain hope, apparently, for the man was pulling a small notebook out of his pocket. He laid it on the railing so he could flip through the pages one-handed. Tolemek glimpsed names, dates, and notations in extremely neat printing.

“Go help with the fire, boy,” Goroth ordered. He too was frowning at the administrator and his notebook.

The page flipping stopped, and the man pointed to a name. “Ah, yes. I thought that sounded familiar. Lieutenant Caslin Ahn. Flight name: Raptor. Member: Wolf Squadron. Active since the third of Maynok, 937.” His tone never changed as he spoke.

“Who is this hedgehog?” Goroth, standing behind the administrator’s back, mouthed.

Tolemek could only shake his head. A pirate outpost ought to be the last place one could find someone so organized. He might admire such meticulous note-taking in other circumstances, but not now.

The administrator lifted his brows. “You did not think it important to report that your vessel contained a wanted pirate enemy, Captain Slaughter?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“This is a bounty,” the administrator said, “though I’m more concerned about maintaining peace on the station. She will need to be located.” The inflection in his deadpan voice never changed, but his

eyes had a slight gleam as he said, “This can be accomplished easily with enough people searching.”

“I’ll find her,” Tolemek said and headed for the gangplank. He had to make sure he found Ahn—Caslin—before this overzealous port attendant put the word out to everyone. It would be nice to use her first name, now that he knew it.

Goroth caught up with him at the gangplank, lifting a hand to make him pause. “I’ll take care of the fire. And you’re welcome.” His squint said he placed the blame for the mess straight on Tolemek’s shoulders. Rightfully so. “It might be a while before I can bring the ship back over though—” he waved to the smoke, “—so you’ll be on your own over there. Stay out of trouble. Meet back here—no, let’s meet at the Squatting Crow, midnight. Just in case we’re under scrutiny.” He frowned at the administrator who was making notes in his book.

“I’ll have her,” Tolemek said.

Chapter 8

There were two guards wandering around the dragon flier, occasionally answering questions but mostly turning away curious pirates who ambled close. Cables stretched across the bronze wings and ran to eyelets on the landing pad, as if force were required to keep the craft from taking off. Fliers did look vaguely like crouching dragons, wings spread, ready to leap into the air and take off, but they were ultimately just machines and wouldn't go anywhere without a pilot. This particular craft looked like it had been pulled out of the depths of the ocean, with brown sludge dulling the hull and crusty grime caking the wings. Some kind of banner or sign hung from the cockpit. Cas thought it might declare the craft's owner—whoever had salvaged it—but she was too far away to read the lettering.

She crouched on the roof of one of the sturdier buildings, keeping her back to a vent spewing bacon-scented smoke. It wasn't much in the way of cover, and she felt exposed, since many of the airships docked to either side of the floating outpost had decks as high as her position. She wished night would fall, but she had no concept of how soon that might be. The strange fog that hugged the whole place hadn't abated.

Shouts came from a nearby street, and a squad of men ran into view. Their eccentric clothing, most of it doubtlessly plundered from ships all around the world, kept them from looking like an organized military unit, but they were sticking together and peering into alleys. They were also armed.

Cas flattened to her belly. She didn't recognize them as men from Captain Slaughter's ship, but she hadn't met everyone there either, having been busy starting fires in their engine room.

What if Slaughter had told everyone on the station about her and had them hunting for her? She craned her neck to look at his ship—she couldn't see the deck, but its big black balloon was distinctive and visible. Though, oddly, it seemed farther away than before. She risked rising into a crouch again. Yes, it had moved away from its berth and floated perhaps a hundred meters away from the outpost. Something to do with her fire?

A faint rumble reached her ears, and Cas forgot about the searchers and Slaughter's ship. The noise sounded familiar, very familiar. Propellers.

She checked to make sure the search party had moved off the nearby street and that nobody was creeping up on her before focusing on the nearest of the giant propellers that helped hold the outpost aloft. Their hum was a constant here, and it continued on as it had before. This was a new noise, and it seemed to be coming from the fog beyond the outpost rather than some machinery on it. And there was more than one propeller making the noise, she was sure of it. She couldn't guess why they were coming—they couldn't know she was here... how could they?—but the rumbling grew louder and filled her with hope.

An eardrum-piercing wail erupted from horns mounted on poles at the corners of the outpost. Someone else had noticed the noise and knew what it meant.

The first dragon flier came into view, yellow eyes and a gray snout painted on the nose of the craft. Cas grinned so hard her mouth ached. Wolf Squadron.

Several more craft followed the first out of the fog. She couldn't make out the numbers on the sides of the fliers yet, but she recognized an attack formation when she saw one. She caught herself standing and waving, but forced herself back into a crouch, not wanting to draw the attention of enemies in the streets below. Pirates were flooding out of buildings, shouting over the sirens and racing to artillery weapons stationed along the edges of the outpost and also on some roofs.

Before the twelfth flier came into sight, the first was already firing, strafing the side of the outpost and spraying bullets. No, it wasn't aiming at the outpost but at the airships docked along its edge. Pirates were out on the decks and running toward weapons, the same as the people on the station were doing, but everyone had clearly been caught off guard.

The fliers streaked toward Cas's end of the outpost, and she shrank back, bumping into the vent. They couldn't possibly know she was alive, and they might kill her without knowing she was there. She ought to run for one of the few brick or stone buildings—they would be the most likely to survive gunfire—but if the pilots started lobbing explosives, it wouldn't matter how thick the walls were. Besides, she wanted to know what they were after.

The answer to her question came almost immediately as the three lead fliers swerved in, under the giant balloons that marked the ceiling of the outpost, and veered toward the flier. Her first thought was that they might have some crazy plan to throw cables around it

and take it with them, but that would be dangerous even without the pirates firing at them. A gray cylinder shot from the teeth of one of those fliers, exploding when it struck the landing pad near the salvaged craft.

"They want to destroy it?" Cas slumped. She wasn't surprised—there were standing orders not to let the power crystals fall into enemy hands—but that had been her ride home. If they blew it up, she wouldn't have a way to escape.

A bomb landed on the building next to hers. It exploded on impact, and rubble flew in a thousand directions. Cas dropped to her belly, throwing her hands over her head. As the squadron swooped across the outpost, bullets and explosives laying waste to the structures and docked ships, she stopped worrying about escape and started worrying about surviving. To the fast-moving fliers, she had to appear as nothing more than one more pirate to be exterminated.

The locals had found their posts, and the booms of cannons and explosives roared above the buzz of the propellers. Guns fired from the decks of the individual airships too. The fliers weaved, making hard targets, but their maneuverability was limited between the envelopes and the building-filled outpost itself.

More shrapnel clattered down on Cas's rooftop. She didn't know where it was coming from this time, but staying up there wasn't safe.

When another wolf-nosed craft streaked in her direction, she rolled to the edge and scrambled down into the street. It didn't fire near her though; it was aiming toward the salvaged flier. The seaweed- and grime-covered craft had already been damaged with that first explosive, and its cockpit lay torn open like a flower shredded by the wind. Yet a glow came from its engine compartment. The crystal powering it must have survived even after years in the ocean. Cas grimaced again, knowing she might have been able to get the craft working and flown home. It was too late now.

In an impressive feat of piloting, the flier weaved between the gunfire of two deck-mounted artillery weapons, dropping a pair of hooks on cables as it flew. The pilot was going to pluck out the energy source—or try anyway. Those crystals were securely mounted into their slots.

Cas leaned to the side, squinted, and was finally able to read the numbers stenciled on the side.

"W-83?" she blurted. That was Colonel Zirkander's flier.

Was he back? Or was someone flying it for him? The pilot wore a helmet and goggles—it was impossible to tell from a distance, but that craft *was* weaving and dipping in his style of semi-controlled recklessness.

The hooks missed on the craft's first pass, scraping the surface of

the crystal but not finding purchase. By now, the gunners were aiming at it almost exclusively, despite two wingmen flying nearby, trying to take out the nearest artillery weapons. A cannon fired, the black ball blasting past W-14—Captain Crash Haksor—and heading straight for 83. It skimmed across the cockpit.

"It's getting too hot," Cas whispered. "Get out of there."

The squadron might have taken the outpost by surprise, but that was wearing off now. More than that, the pirates seemed to have recognized what the 83 meant too. All of the cannons and guns on that side of the outpost were locking in on Zirkander's craft. Two of the launched airships were moving away from their berths and veering in that direction too. A pair of large doors, or perhaps sliding panels, had opened at one corner of the outpost. A thunk-clank sounded and a bulky machine rose from the compartment, some giant cup-shaped apparatus holding netting. It almost looked like an old-fashioned catapult. Whatever it was, that netting was more sophisticated than the hammock Cas had tossed over that kid's head. A big enough net hurled at a flier could be trouble.

The streets were deserted around her now, with all of the pirates manning a station or back on their ships. With her pistol in hand, Cas ran toward the catapult. She had some vague idea of helping by disabling it. More than that, she wanted Zirkander, or whoever was flying his rig, to *notice* her helping. There wasn't room in a flier for a second person, but she would jump on the back and cling to the top of the cockpit if it would get her home.

She hadn't run more than two blocks before a gang of pirates stalked out of an alley with bags and chests balanced over their shoulders. They all carried swords or pistols too. She tried to veer around them to continue past, hoping that in the chaos they wouldn't notice her, or at least wouldn't identify her as anything other than a fellow pirate.

But one pointed at her and yelled, "Witness. Get her!"

Witness, what?

Several guns were aimed in her direction. Her instincts took over, and she threw herself into a roll, angling toward the closest cover: a street lamp. Guns fired, and bullets skipped off the pavement around her. She lunged to her feet, firing as she ducked behind the post. It wasn't that thick, but she wasn't that thick, either. Besides, there were no other options nearby. Aiming by instinct, and years of experience, she leaned out slightly and fired three times in rapid succession. They fired back. One of their bullets clipped the lamp fixture, and glass exploded over her head. All she did was lean closer to the post and shoot around it twice more.

"Cover," one of the men yelled, "find cover."

She thought this was a reflection of her marksmanship—three men were writhing on the ground, after all—but the buzz of propellers hammered her ears as a flier roared over the nearest building. The pirates stopped firing at her, dropped their burdens, and ran for an alley.

As much as Cas would have liked to jump on and get a ride, she doubted the pilot would recognize her. Who was that? Lieutenant Sparks? Smoke combined with the fog to turn the air a soupy gray that made it hard to see more than fifteen meters. She waved anyway, glancing over her shoulder, as she ran. The craft laid down bullets, obliterating the bags and boxes the pirates had abandoned—and obliterating some of the men she had injured as well.

Cas gulped and lunged into the alley—on the opposite side of the street from the pirates—and raced for the next block. Only when she glanced back to check for pursuers, did she notice the gold coins and small treasures that had spilled out of the dumped cargo. Those men must have been taking advantage of the chaos to loot. From their own people. What heroes.

Cas reloaded her pistol and started toward the catapult again. The side of the landing pad and the railing marking the end of the outpost platform were visible at the end of her street. The net-weapon, if it hadn't already fired its load, would be off to the right. A couple more blocks, and she could reach it. And help her comrades—and maybe be noticed by her comrades. She wasn't ready to give up on the idea of rescue.

Before she reached the end of the street, a great explosion thundered not fifty meters away from her. The ground—a floating platform thousands of feet above the ocean, she was reminded—heaved like a wave, nearly hurling Cas into the nearest building. Shrapnel pummeled the pavement, some pieces so large they could have killed a man. She ducked into a doorway for protection. A head-sized piece of black pavement slammed down two feet away, its ragged edges smoldering. More chunks hammered the street. The whole platform seemed to tilt downward now. What had they blown up? More than a building that time.

Cas poked her head out of the doorway long enough to look toward the landing pad.

"Oh." The landing pad was gone. The whole open area she had been aiming toward was gone, too, including at least one of the giant propellers that helped the outpost remain aloft. For the first time, she worried that the squadron might succeed in utterly destroying the floating city. "Not a goal I'd normally object to, but now..." She eyed the six giant balloons above. *They* at least seemed stable still, some coating doubtlessly protecting them from the bullets. She was

surprised any of the fliers had carried explosives powerful enough to destroy the landing pad and the surrounding platform. Then another, "Oh," slipped out of her mouth. The power crystal. If the colonel hadn't been able to extract it, he might have blown it up. Yes, she had seen one destroyed before. That had been in the air rather than on the ground, but the explosion had sent a shockwave that she had felt, flying far behind the lead craft.

After the debris quit hammering the street, Cas slipped out of hiding, changing her plan. In case the platform *was* on its way into the ocean far below, she needed to get to one of the ships. As much as she loathed the idea, that might mean returning to Captain Slaughter. He wouldn't be tickled to see her after she had started that fire, but where else could she go? She wouldn't be able to sneak onto anything now; all of the pirates would be aboard and fighting. She didn't even know if any of the ships were left in dock. She halted, groaning as she remembered that Slaughter's ship had left to deal with the fire.

"Nice job, L.T.," she grumbled to herself. "Sabotage the ship you need to get away in."

She jogged in the direction she had last seen it anyway. Or started to. Another explosion came from that side of the outpost. It wasn't as violent as the last one, but it filled the sky with more black smoke. It was one of the smaller airships, one that was—she snorted—flying a yellow-and-blue Iskandian flag. Or at least it had been. That flag, its pole shattered, was fluttering to the pavement where what remained of the craft was berthed. What remained wasn't much. Little more than a charred, smoking husk. No less than six fliers sailed away from the destroyed craft, their mission apparently accomplished.

Strange. What had been on that ship that had demanded such attention? Cas had assumed the salvaged flier was the main mission—keeping it and its crystal from being sold to the highest bidder for study—but perhaps that had been a side mission, or even a diversion?

The pirates had marshaled their forces now, and four airships, cannons and guns blazing, chased after the six Wolf Squadron pilots. Smoke drifted from the wing of one flier and from the engine area of another. Cas clenched a fist, silently willing them to get out of there. She couldn't tell whose craft those were through the smoke and the distance, but she didn't want to hear of any of her comrades going down.

They seemed to be done with their mission, though, and were forming up to fly away. Smoke notwithstanding, all twelve fliers were accounted for. The pirate ships sailed after them in pursuit, but couldn't match their speed. One after another, the fliers disappeared into the fog.

A lump formed in her throat. They were going home... and she

wasn't. Had anyone even noticed she was here?

Someone grabbed Cas from behind, pulling her off her feet and toting her toward an alley. She tried to wrench herself free even as she lifted her pistol to aim over her shoulder. A hand clamped down, pinning hers in an awkward position, her finger off the trigger.

A shot fired, but it wasn't hers. A bullet smashed into the corrugated metal corner of a building, a building she had been standing next to seconds before. Standing and staring, without paying attention to her surroundings.

"It's me," spoke a familiar voice in her ear. "You're about to be the most wanted person on this station. What remains of it."

Cas stopped her struggles, though she wasn't sure Tolemek was an ally after what she had done to his ship. Hells, she hadn't been sure he was an ally before, either. Someone she was using in the same manner as he intended to use her, perhaps. Still, he had just pulled her out of the line of fire.

"I don't suppose you have a suggestion on how to deal with this new problem?" she asked.

For the first time in she didn't know how many minutes, the noise was fading around them—the cannons had stopped booming and the guns still firing were on the ships flying after the squadron, their noise muffled by distance and the fog.

"Yeah," Tolemek said. "Hide."

"Hide?" Fleeing had figured more prominently in her mind.

"The captain will need time to repair the ship, which was damaged even *before* the attack." His face was next to hers, since his arm was still holding her against his torso, so he couldn't glare at her, but he was probably trying to anyway.

At least he didn't seem furious about the fact. But then, he could be hiding it. Cas had seen him vent frustration, however briefly, in that empty library, but when it came to dealing with people, she had a feeling he was the type who could be utterly furious with a person yet never show it... until it was too late for his target to respond.

"I won't be able to protect you, either," Tolemek went on, "not after your squadron just laid waste to half the ships in dock. Hells, they'll want to lynch me when they find out I brought you here. Unfortunately, we can't leave until the captain does some repairs. So, yes. Hide."

"On the station, or off? I only ask because I'm questioning the air worthiness of this outpost right now."

"It's not going to drop out of the sky. I've seen the blueprints; there's a lot of redundancy built in."

"Did you by chance have a hand in designing it?" Cas asked.

"Just some of the defenses. Like the fog. Which didn't fool your

people one iota today. If I thought you had any dragon blood, I'd suspect you of calling out to them somehow."

Cas shuddered at the idea of having witch blood, or even being accused of having it, but she forced a sarcastic indifference into her tone. "If I could do that, I would have called out for them to take me with them, don't you think?"

"Yes."

"Now that we've settled that, would you mind putting me down? And letting go of my pistol hand?" She had another pistol and could reach it with her left hand, but wasn't inclined toward shooting him at the moment.

Tolemek let go of her weapon, and the arm around her waist loosened. She slid down him, her toes touching the debris-littered pavement.

A pirate jumped around the corner, pointing a pistol into the alley. Cas cursed—of *course* the man who had shot at her would try again. She reacted on instinct again, firing a split second before Tolemek dragged her toward refuse bins against the wall.

"Damn," he whispered, stopping in the middle of his lunge. Cas's shot had taken the pirate in the forehead. "That's uncanny."

No, that was having a dad who had been training her to follow in the family business since she had been old enough to toddle. She wished he hadn't taught her so much indifference when it came to drilling people with bullets, but perhaps it served her in this situation.

"I'm ready for that hiding spot now." Cas waved the pistol. "I'm getting low on the ammo I purloined from your trunk."

Tolemek nodded toward the far end of the alley. "This way."

Since all she had managed was to get herself shot at when she had been choosing a route, she was content to let him lead. She would be even more content if darkness would fall. With pirates streaming about on high alert, it was going to be hard to sneak anywhere. She reloaded her guns and strode after Tolemek, though she couldn't help but gaze toward the sky in the direction the squadron had flown off and wish she were with them.

. . . . .

Tolemek saw the longing looks Ahn sent in the direction the fliers had gone. He chose not to tell her how relieved he was that the squadron had departed without destroying the outpost, his ship, or *her*. He wasn't sure when he had started to feel responsible for her safety, and ferocious toward things that threatened it, but when he had been charging around the station, dodging shrapnel and searching for her, he'd had men take one look at his face and then flee the other way. If he'd had a weapon capable of shooting down those fliers, he would

have.

The attack squadron had annihilated Stone Heart's *Burning Dragon*. Though he had wondered briefly at the notion that Ahn might have somehow summoned them, he had a feeling the Iskandian military had been tracking that Cofah corporal all along. They must have realized someone had survived the battle at their secret mines and wanted to ensure that he didn't report back to his people.

Tolemek stuck to the alleys, picking a route that would lead to the opposite end of the outpost, though at the shouts he started hearing in the streets, he wondered if a closer hiding spot would have been better.

A cry of, "Ten gold coins to the man who finds her," from a nearby street did not sound promising at all. Tolemek had hoped the attack would have delayed that administrator from relaying the information on Ahn's presence, but it seemed not.

"I don't suppose he's lost his grandmother and is looking for help finding her," Ahn said.

"Grandmothers aren't much of a fixture here." Tolemek ducked into an alley behind one of the few brick buildings, stopping by a series of metal boxes on its back wall. He spun a lock on the biggest one and entered a combination. "Unless you count that lady who runs the laundry service and keeps all the cats. She calls them her children. And her children are prolific."

Ahn pointed to the box he was opening. "If that's access to the control panel that will allow us to blow up the entire station, I think we should make sure we have a way off first."

Apparently she had escape on her mind, not cat-granny jokes. Appropriate, he supposed.

"Nothing so sinister." Tolemek opened the door and slid a few levers from a neutral position to the maximum setting, then closed the panel. "It'll thicken the fog more."

He led Ahn toward another alley entrance. "I can't believe Stone Heart had a flier squadron tailing him all the way from the mainland and didn't notice it. He's an experienced captain. It's unthinkable." He looked at her, in case she might want to posit an alternative theory, but she kept her mouth shut. Her expression was particularly grim this evening.

Tolemek supposed it wouldn't mean anything to her if he said that he was starting to find even her grim expressions attractive. Maybe it was just the fact that her bruises were healing nicely, and her face had taken on a more normal shape, but he doubted it. He almost grinned at the memory of that cabin boy explaining how she had tricked him into dropping his trousers and holding an innocuous flask of liquid over his head until he had figured out a way to escape, something he

might not have been inspired to do if not for the smoke wafting past the porthole.

Ah, but what was he to do about these inconvenient feelings? Nothing. Whether or not he had stopped considering her the enemy, he knew she still considered him one. And rightfully so. Attraction or not, he wasn't going to pass up the opportunity of using her to get to Zirkander, *especially* if Zirkander had a witch ally who knew something about soulblades. To finally have a real lead on a quest that had occupied all of his free time for the last three years... he couldn't pass up that opportunity.

"Am I looking inscrutable?" Ahn asked. "Or is that the look you wear when you've forgotten the way to your secret hiding spot, and you're trying to remember it?"

"I was—" Tolemek stopped and listened as no fewer than ten men strode down the nearby street, their weapon-laden belts jangling. He drew Ahn into the deep shadows of an alcove. "I was merely waiting for the fog to deepen so we could move on with less risk of discovery."

"Huh, that's interesting." She peered into his eyes.

"What?"

"Seems like I've been around you for long enough now that I can tell when you're lying."

Tolemek avoided her eyes, looking at the cheap veneer on the wall on the other side of the alley instead. "All right, I *was* scrutinizing you."

"So long as you weren't contemplating unique and effective torments as revenge for me stealing some of your goo and making a mess with it."

"No." He gave her a curious look. "I didn't get a chance to see much of the damage, but from the report I heard, you could have done much more."

This time, she avoided his eyes. "I just wanted to escape, not annoy your captain so much that he'd devote the rest of his life to hunting me down."

It was silly, but he wished she'd said *he* was the one she didn't want to annoy. Tolemek thunked his head against the wall and reminded himself that feelings would only distract him here.

"I'm not sure he'll appreciate your solicitude," he said, "but I do. Come, the fog has thickened. We ought to be able to reach the spot I have in mind without being noticed."

"What is this stuff made from anyway?" Ahn waved at the soupy air as she followed him into a space between two buildings that was too narrow to be considered an alley.

"My special proprietary blend."

"In other words, you're not sharing your secret?"

“Not until you renounce your Iskandian citizenship and agree to become my loyal lab assistant.”

Ahn snorted. “Sure. I’ll send in the paperwork tomorrow.”

Tolemek stepped out from between the two buildings, only to halt and squeeze back into the crack. Pirates carrying guns and lanterns were striding down the street that he and Ahn needed to run down to reach the next alley. It was only twenty meters away, but a party was coming from the opposite direction as well.

“Check between those buildings,” someone called, not from either of the groups in the street but from the block they had left.

“These search parties are getting a little too organized for my tastes,” Tolemek muttered.

“We can handle it.” The click of a gun being cocked reached his ear.

“Let me take care of it. These are... Ahn, I can’t be seen with you if you’re going to run around shooting everyone on the station. These are my people, my allies.”

“Yeah? I saw some of them looting one of the shops earlier. Loyalty seems fleeting here.”

“Some of them are closer allies than others.” Tolemek lifted a hand to forestall further arguments—or derisive commentary on the pirates—since the parties had made their way closer. They were going to cross paths right in front of his position. He lowered his voice to a murmur and added, “Don’t shoot unless it’s an emergency. And watch the route behind you.”

“Understood.”

Tolemek remained still, hoping the fog and the shadows might hide him. Maybe the men would simply walk past without noticing.

“Who’s that there?” One of the pirates lifted a lantern in Tolemek’s direction.

He leaned his shoulder against the corner to block the view of Ahn. “Deathmaker.” He made his voice as chill and forbidding as he could manage. Meanwhile, he slipped a hand into a pouch at his belt. Though he hadn’t stopped by his cabin since the meeting, he always kept a few vials and contraptions with him. The pirates might be the only people in the world he could claim as allies, but that didn’t mean he trusted all of them.

The men exchanged glances with each other.

“You seen the Wolf Squadron girl?”

“They say she came in on your ship,” someone in the back of the group added. “With you.”

“She escaped our ship, yes. I don’t know anything about it. I was called out here to fix the fog. It’s thicker than porridge.” Indeed, it wafted down the streets, curling about the legs of the pirates. Tolemek

might be able to roll something out there without them noticing. The other group was approaching, so he decided to wait. Maybe he could hit both parties at once.

"Yeah, getting worse by the minute. What happened?"

"One of the fliers hit the control panel and damaged it," Tolemek said.

A tap came at his shoulder. "The ones behind us are looking up the alleys," Ahn whispered.

"Strange that the Iskandians found us through it," one of the men said.

Tolemek slid a leather-wrapped sphere out of his pouch.

"They say there's a witch working for Zirkander now," the man went on. "Maybe she helped him find us."

Huh. Word from that meeting had gotten out quickly.

"*What?*" Ahn whispered.

One of the pirates squinted at Tolemek. "There's not someone behind you in that crack, is there?"

"No." Tolemek pointed toward the roof of the building across the street. "Think I saw someone move up there though. Anyone got a reason to spy on you boys?"

Not all of them looked—more than one man squinted at Tolemek—but he didn't care. He armed his sphere and bent slightly, to roll it toward the center of the groups without letting it make noise.

He slipped a hand behind him to push at Ahn. They would need to back out of the range of the odor that would soon be disseminated. But she had already moved. He glanced back, afraid she had left for some reason. She was in the center of the narrow alley, down on one knee, fog whispering past her shoulders as she aimed a pistol toward the opposite end.

"What is that smell?" one of the men in front demanded.

"The fog," Tolemek said. "I'd best see to the repairs." He backed into the alley, wrinkling his nose as he caught a whiff of his concoction, a faint rose-petal scent not quite masking the more sinister chemical odor beneath it. He would have to work on that, so long as he didn't pass out from inhaling his own knock-out gas first.

He squeezed through the alley toward Ahn, his shoulders brushing the walls, and knelt behind her.

"You shouldn't need to fire," he whispered. "The search parties I was talking to will be unconscious shortly, and we can go that way."

In the deepening gloom, he could barely see her, but he thought she nodded. Another half hour and night would fall, making it easier to move about, but he hoped they had reached the spot he sought before then. Every moment they were out in the open, they risked being caught—or shot.

Soft thumps came from the street behind him.

"That should be it," he whispered and started to back in that direction.

A clank-clunk-thump sounded, something bouncing off the wall and into their alley. Tolemek grabbed Ahn's shoulder, images of grenades bursting in his mind, but not before she got two shots off. One of them seemed to strike the item, for the clanks sounded, going in the other direction. Tolemek had scarcely seen anything. He pulled Ahn toward the street.

A flash of light and a boom came from the object—it was farther away than he would have expected. Shouts of surprise—and pain—arose from that direction. Ahn must have shot the grenade itself, knocking it back toward the men who had thrown it. Tolemek could barely see in the shadows and fog and couldn't imagine how she had made the shot.

Ahn, less constricted by the narrow walls, spun and pushed at him—as if he hadn't been trying to pull her in that direction all along. "Time to go. That won't stop them for long."

Tolemek jogged into the street where he had rolled out the sphere. Even more fog had gathered, but not enough to hide the lanterns lying on the pavement, lanterns that had been in men's hands before. He ran past the slumbering figures, leading Ahn up the street, across it, and into a new alley.

"You should have stored those leather balls somewhere obvious, so I could find them in your cabin," Ahn said. "I wouldn't have had to burn holes in the engine. Could have just knocked out everyone on the deck to escape."

"Yes... In the future, I'll make sure to organize and label my lab for the convenience of prisoners."

"Maybe add a map and some diagrams too."

Tolemek found himself grinning despite the circumstances—and the fact that he was going to have a difficult time walking about on the Roaming Curse outpost again without getting shot, assuming he made it off this time without getting shot. He took a final turn, then stopped before a brick wall at the end of an alley. Shouts echoed in the streets behind them, calls for reinforcements. So much for sneaking over to this end of the outpost without being noticed.

"You'd think they would have repairs to worry about," he muttered.

Ahn tapped the brick wall. "Dead end?"

"No." The fog obscured the ground, so Tolemek tapped around with his boot until he located a spot that clanged instead of thudding. He knelt and found a grate.

"Sewers? I wouldn't have thought this place had anything intricate

beneath the platform."

"It doesn't. These grates just funnel rainwater off the streets and into the sea below. But they also lead somewhere else." Not surprisingly, the grate was locked.

"Want me to open that?" Ahn asked.

"Your opening method leaves a lot of destroyed evidence behind to mark a person's passing."

Shouts came from a nearby street.

"Is that a no?" Ahn bounced on her toes, one of the six-shooters in hand again as she watched the path behind them.

"Correct." Tolemek pulled out a vial, uncapped it, and carefully poured a couple of drops of gray liquid into the lock hole. "We're not going far once we crawl down here, so I don't want anyone noticing that someone passed through."

"With all this fog, you can't even see the grate itself."

"True, but it's possible someone will turn that down at some point. I'm not the only one on the station who knows how to push a lever."

"You should have booby-trapped it then," Ahn said.

"That would have been needlessly destructive."

She glanced back at him, giving a pointed look toward the grate. He didn't think she could see the hint of smoke rising from the lock, but she might be able to smell the melting mechanism.

"And possibly a good idea," he admitted. "Suggest it earlier next time."

"Next time? Are you planning on escaping from a lot more angry mobs with me?"

"Judging by what I've come to know about you in the last twenty-four hours, it seems inevitable. If we continue to spend time together, that is." Tolemek tried the grate. The locking mechanism had disintegrated, and he opened it with ease. "My lady. Your duct awaits."

Chapter 9

Cas peered into the dark vertical drop below the open grate. From what she could make out, the walls were dark and slimy, and the lighter gray at the bottom suggested an opening about fifteen feet down. An opening that couldn't lead to anything except a drop of thousands of feet, followed by a plunge into the ocean filled with sharks. Not that the sharks would truly matter. At the speed one would hit the water, it would be like landing on cement. "I think you should go first."

"I need to close the grate behind us."

"I can do that."

"You're too short. The shaft leading to the side is nearly seven feet down."

"What shaft?" Ahn asked. "All I see is a well with a long drop at the bottom of it."

"There's another grate across the bottom, but I can lower you down, so you can crawl into the access shaft before landing on that grate."

"You've done this before?"

"I've studied the blueprint."

"Oh, that's all manner of comforting."

Weapons jangled in the street closest to their dead-end alley. Tolemek threw an exasperated look in that direction, then whispered, "Fine, you'll have to crawl down me then."

Without hesitation, he slipped into the hole, lowering his body until only his hands remained, gripping the sides of the rectangular opening. For a moment, they didn't move. Was he patting around with his feet for that side passage?

Cas crouched in the fog beside the opening, ready to shoot whoever came into their alley. She heard scuffling. At least two men. They paused to have a whispered conversation. She caught snatches of it.

"...they go this way?"

"Don't know... don't really want to find them. You see all those men down? The Deathmaker is with her."

"Solid gold coins on her head though."

"It's *his* head I'm worried about."

A pat at Cas's foot nearly made her jump up.

"Now," Tolemek whispered. "Climb down me."

Though Cas wasn't convinced relying on vague memories of blueprints was a good idea, she put the pistol in her mouth and lowered herself into the hole. It was a tight fit with Tolemek there, standing on some ledge, and he hadn't been joking: she had to use him for handholds. The slick, algae-coated wall on the other side didn't offer much to grip. Questioning whether there truly was a protective grate below, she grabbed him harder than he might have had in mind, wrapping her legs around his, as if she was sliding down a tree.

"Interesting place to store a gun," he remarked as their heads drew level. He probably couldn't *see* it in the dark shaft, but when she clunked him in the eye with the handgrip, he must have figured it out.

"I like the taste of metal," she grumbled, the words probably not intelligible with the barrel in her mouth.

"I didn't understand that," Tolemek verified, reaching up to pull the grate closed behind them. "I'll do you a favor and not imagine it was something lewd or innuendo-filled."

"Thanks. You're a gentleman." She lowered herself, hands gripping his shoulders, and reached down with a leg, patting around to try and find the ledge. Ah, there.

The horizontal shaft was larger than she had imagined, perhaps three and a half feet high. Once her boots were planted on the bottom, she swung in, landing in a crouch. It was another rectangular space, the sides still slimed with algae, a nice dense growth. It reminded her of the gunk in the ruins below Dragon Spit. She wondered if that meant the transportable pirate outpost spent a lot of time hiding in tropical climates. Once she was done picking the gunk out from beneath her fingernails, she would write down the intel for her commanders.

On hands and knees, she crawled in a few feet so Tolemek would have room to climb in behind her. An oddly strong draft skimmed past her cheeks, and the rumble of machinery came from somewhere ahead, the *whum-whum-whums* reminding her of the propellers on a flier. She stuck her pistol into her holster and decided to wait for him before crawling farther. For all she knew, this was some underground labyrinth with plenty of spots where one could fall into the ocean below.

A light touch on her shoulder told her Tolemek had joined her. She couldn't see much. She scooted to the side to let him pass. This space wasn't much wider than the last, and it took some maneuvering and much brushing of shoulders and hips before he could crawl into the lead.

“You sure this hiding spot of yours is a good idea?” Cas whispered. “If we end up trapped, and they figure out where we are…” She frowned at the image of being stuck in a dead-end duct with pirates at the entrance, peppering them with bullets.

“It’s a maze down here, and there are other ways out. If they figure out we’re down here, there are only a couple of people on the station who will know it well enough to find their way around, and they’re techs, not fighters.”

“Hm.” Cas’s new mental imagery involved her and Tolemek getting lost in said maze, running out of food and water, and dying without the need for any shooting.

He reached back and patted her on the shoulder. “I have a good memory. It’s all in my mind. We won’t go far, either. Just ahead, there’s a spot where we can stand up and climb onto a ledge. Then our legs won’t be visible if someone does figure out we went through that grate and decides to come down for a look.”

He was moving off as he spoke, and Cas had little choice but to follow him. The lush carpet of algae squished beneath her fingers. “How long did you say we have to stay down here?”

“A few hours. We’re meeting the captain at midnight.”

“Oh, good. I’m sure he’ll be excited to see me again.” Nothing like rejoining the ship one had sabotaged.

“Perhaps not exactly the word I’d use, but he *was* distraught to learn you had left us.”

“I’ll bet.”

She caught up with Tolemek, or rather his legs. Another shaft opened up from their crawl space, this one heading upward at an angle. His legs soon rose out of reach. She crawled after him, running into him again shortly, as soon as the bottom of the duct leveled out. He seemed to be standing. When she tried to do the same, she clunked her head on some edge or corner above her.

“What *is* this place?” she grumbled.

“Access ducts to all of the propellers on this end of the platform and to the holding tanks for the hydrogen for the balloons.” His voice was hollow, echoing oddly from several feet above. He was definitely standing up.

Cas patted overhead, finding the outline of the hole, then maneuvered into a standing position too. She was facing Tolemek, squeezed close by the narrowness of the walls, her smock brushing his chest. Feeling overly intimate in the position, she shifted her hip toward him, though that involved some bumping of body parts too. She was glad he hadn’t made those innuendo-filled comments about the gun earlier.

“Is this our final destination?” she asked. “Maybe I’ll just sit.”

Except then her butt would be in that squishy algae. Ugh, didn't pirates clean their maintenance ducts?

"Your choice. And, yes, I think this is a good place to stay until it's time to meet the captain."

Cas didn't sit. She sighed and leaned her shoulder against the wall, something that didn't keep her other shoulder from touching his chest. Oh, well. So long as he didn't prong her with those spiked wrist guards of his, she could survive the closeness. Besides, as far as chests went, it wasn't a bad one to be pressed up against, as long as she didn't think overmuch about his past.

"My apologies," Tolemek said. "This spot looked bigger on the blueprint."

"A closet would have worked if all you wanted was to get me alone in the dark."

He snorted softly. "Oh? Would you have agreed to spend time in a dark closet with me?"

"If it was between all of those gun-slinging pirates and you, yes."

He seemed to consider that—or perhaps something else—a moment before saying, "What if it was between me and some handsome Iskandian lad?"

"I don't know," Cas said, caught off-guard by the question. "Does he wash his hair?"

Tolemek chuckled softly but didn't otherwise respond, willing to let the topic drop, it seemed. That was good. He would be a wholly inappropriate choice when it came to romantic dalliances. To sleep with him, or do *anything* with him, wouldn't just be a betrayal to herself. It would be a betrayal to her people, to all those who had died horribly at Tanglewood, and to countless others who had been killed, raped, plundered, and gods knew what else at the hands of these pirates.

Still, she found herself asking, "When did that... become a concern for you?"

She wanted to know if he was genuinely interested in something physical—which would mean she should be on guard more than ever around him—or if he was simply making jokes to pass the time. They *were* going to be stuck in here for hours, after all.

"Sometime between you helping me escape," Tolemek said, "and me getting the story from the young man in my cabin, who was apparently quivering and holding a flask of Fen Tree Oil above his head, while wearing his trousers around his ankles." There was a fondness in his voice that should have made her wary, but she found herself smiling in the darkness. Not all men appreciated her... determined approach to dealing with problems.

Tolemek shifted his weight to lean his own shoulder against the

wall and ended up behind her back. He was probably just searching for a more comfortable position. It wasn't as if there was room in the shaft for any physical activities even if he had such in mind. Cas leaned forward, but that resulted in her forehead pressing against the algae-covered wall. Grimacing, she drew back, wriggling an arm up to wipe away the moistness. She tried to find a comfortable position that didn't involve touching, but it didn't work. Sighing, and telling herself it didn't mean anything, she finally let her back lean against his chest. For a moment, he didn't move, almost as if she had caught him by surprise, but then he slipped his arm loosely around her torso and rested his chin against the top of her head.

She waited very stilly, afraid she had inadvertently given him some invitation. Her heart beat faster as she wondered if he would presume to do more—and what would she do if he did?—but he didn't. She could feel the rise and fall of his chest against her back. He seemed relaxed. Contented?

Cas licked her lips. "Is Fen Tree Oil dangerous, by chance?"

"No, medicinal. It's one of the ingredients in my salve."

Cas touched her cheek, the effects of that salve vivid in her memory. It hadn't yet been a full day since he had applied it, but all of the swelling had gone down, and she had to press on the spots she had been struck to find a hint of lingering soreness. "Your army was foolish for not buying that from you. I'm amazed how much better I feel today, despite having just spent the afternoon dodging bullets and shrapnel."

"Could be the healing power of being wrapped in my arms."

"Please. Your awful bracers are an inch from eviscerating me." They weren't, but she was pleased that her response elicited another chuckle from him. He had a pleasant laugh.

For a murderer, she reminded herself and swallowed. Even if she could somehow forgive him for his choices, his history, there was still the matter of Colonel Zirkander and the fact that he wanted to use her to get to him.

"So," Cas said, "where to after we meet with your captain?"

"Iskandia."

"To drop me off and then leave without hurting anyone? Especially squadron leaders of mine?"

Tolemek lifted his head from hers and sighed, his breath stirring her hair. His arm fell away from her, leaving a cold chill behind.

"I thought so." Cas didn't pull away from him—as if there was somewhere to pull *to*—but she did fold her arms over her chest and glower at the wall. It was what she had expected, but for some reason she had thought... what? That if he was developing some feelings for her, he might abandon his pirate ways? Sure, Cas. Sure.

“Did you see the ship that was destroyed?” Tolemek asked. “The one that seemed to be either the secondary or primary target for your squadron?”

“I saw it.”

“Did it have any significance to you?”

“No...” Cas wondered if he was deliberately trying to change the subject so she would forget about his ulterior motives or if he truly wanted to discuss this. “I didn’t see the name before they pounded it full of explosives. I might have seen it before, but pirate ships all look the same after a while. You’d be amazed at how many of them think it’s charming to paint the hull black.”

“It was the *Burning Dragon*, commanded by Captain Stone Heart.”

Cas wondered why he was volunteering the information. As they had just established, they weren’t exactly on the same side, cozy moments in dark ducts notwithstanding. “I’ve heard of it, but I don’t know why it would be targeted above all the others, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It’s not. I already know.”

Cas waited curiously. It had been almost three weeks since her flier had gone down and she’d been captured. That was an eternity in war time, and a lot could happen. She longed for information on what her squadron was up to, even if she couldn’t be there with them and a part of the action.

“Oh?” she prompted when Tolemek didn’t go on. Surely he wouldn’t have brought it up if he didn’t mean to explain it to her.

“I would like to trade this information to you, in exchange for you answering a few questions of mine.”

Cas stiffened. And just what questions might *those* be? “I’m vaguely curious about what the squadron is up to, but I’m not betraying any of my people, and certainly not my commander, for the information.”

“I know. What I would like to ask should not be a betrayal. I simply wish to know where you stand on some matters, so as to decide if there is a way we can work together instead of in opposition to each other.”

Cas chewed on that a little, trying to decide if he meant to try and trick her into cooperating or at least leaking sensitive information, or if he genuinely might want to figure out a way to go ahead as... something other than enemies. And if there was some of the latter in his words, was that what *she* wanted? If nothing else, should she not try to lure him into some trap, even as he and his captain tried to use her to lay one for Zirkander? She had to be careful thinking like that though. He might not stroll around with books clutched to his chest and quotations of mathematical formulas on his lips, but the very existence of all of his potions and inventions suggested he was a very

smart pirate.

"Go on," she finally said.

"Was that an agreement to answer some questions for me?"

"You give me your information, and I'll consider answering some questions."

"Consider, huh?"

"That's more than you were getting before."

His soft grunt wasn't quite a laugh, not like the chuckles from before, but he sounded more amused than irritated. Good.

"All right," Tolemek said. "I don't know whether he was back on the ship when your people attacked, but Stone Heart had brought an interesting passenger with him to the station. He showed up to talk at a meeting of all the captains currently docked here. He is—or was—a Cofah soldier who was part of an attack on a secret mining installation in the mountains of your homeland. According to him, it's where your flier power crystals come from."

He paused, and Cas expected a question. Such as did she know anything about this? The answer was no—her flier had simply come with a crystal installed in the engine. She knew their origins were a secret of the kingdom, and she had never asked about them. What did she care, so long as the power crystals worked reliably and got her into the air?

"It seems your Colonel Zirkander was there, in charge of this secret installation," Tolemek said.

That made Cas pull her head back in surprise. *That's* where the higher ups had sent him? A mine in the mountains? *Why?*

"It seems there was also some witch or sorceress with a soulblade there working with him," he said.

"Uh, *what?*"

"That's what the Cofah corporal said."

"Maybe the Cofah corporal got walloped hard on the side of the head while he was serving."

"He said he saw the battle with his own eyes and that the sorceress was the only reason they were defeated, because they had a mercenary shaman of their own."

Cas shook her head all through his explanations. "There's no way my military, my government, or anyone on my continent would have anything to do with a witch. Sorcerer. Whatever." She had no idea what the difference was; hells, she hadn't even thought they existed anymore. She'd always thought accusing people of witchcraft was something the superstitious hill folk did to get rid of annoying in-laws and neighbors. It certainly never seemed to happen in the big city, where she had grown up. At least not that she had heard about. "I don't know how it is in Cofahre or on floating pirate outposts, but

people get drowned over accusations of witchcraft in Iskandia."

His voice grew noticeably grim when he said, "Cofah traditions are not dissimilar."

"Even if someone in my country did have some sort of power, if she was even vaguely smart, she would hide it. She wouldn't be out in the middle of some fortress, throwing magic around with a—what did you call it?"

"Soulblade."

"A magic sword?"

"Essentially. But it's more than a simple tool. These ancient swords contain the souls of powerful sorcerers who once walked the world as mortals but then, when learning that disease or old age was creeping up on them, undertook a special ceremony to transfer their essences—all they knew and all they were aside from their physical bodies—into a sword. The weapon could then be handed to another sorcerer, often some youth coming up through the Referatu training system. They would be bonded somehow, and the sword would become a mentor and an ally. The swords themselves possessed some of the power that the owner had wielded during life, so a sorcerer with a bonded soulblade could be extremely powerful, more so than one sorcerer alone."

"This all sounds like goat droppings," Cas said. She couldn't believe he knew so much about it. Surely he didn't *believe* any of this? "This soldier told you all this? How could you know he was telling the truth? It sounds like a fanciful tale to me."

"He told us of the battle and of seeing the sword-wielding woman defeat their shaman and use the blade to deflect bullets and magical attacks. Based on his description, I deduced that he had seen a soulblade. And a powerful sorceress."

So all that knowledge about souls and dead sorcerers was Tolemek's from some past research? Cas remembered his words in the ruins beneath the prison, that he had sought some ancient magic to help... it had been a little sister, hadn't it? Or had that been some lie meant to win her over to his side? Maybe he had spent time researching these swords because he wanted one.

"So, would a normal non-witchy person gain anything from wielding one of these swords?" she asked, wondering what he had *truly* sought down in those ruins.

Tolemek shifted his weight behind her. "Hm, possibly? From my research, I got the impression that it was unlikely a soulblade would deign to be handled by someone who didn't have dragon blood. They're supposed to be sentient still, and they might harm you to keep you from even picking them up."

"Huh," Cas said. It was about all she could think of to say. All of

this sounded like fantasy to her. “I still think your Cofah soldier might have been hit on the head, or that he was telling your captains a tale he thought might get him accepted into the outfit. If he truly saw those mines...” Cas shut her mouth. She didn’t want to speculate about top-secret mines with him. She didn’t know where they were, so she was certain *he* shouldn’t know where they were either.

“Any chance your Colonel Zirkander is being controlled by this sorceress?”

“Please, the king can’t even control him. Or the commandant. Or anyone in his chain of command.”

“Yes, but they’re not pretty women, presumably.”

“He’s not the type to—” Well, Zirkander liked pretty women just fine, and she had seen him go home with some of the ones from the taverns before, but, no, he wouldn’t let one sway him like that. “He wouldn’t let a woman control him, and certainly not some witch. It’s true he’s a little on the superstitious side, but not hugely so. He wouldn’t let that blind him or scare him.” She decided not to mention that dragon carving he flew with. “He certainly wouldn’t get into bed with a woman who had ulterior motives.” Much like Cas wouldn’t get into bed with a pirate who had ulterior motives. “He’s got a lot of flatterers. He’s good at sussing that stuff out.”

“You seem to know a lot about him, outside of his professional persona.” Tolemek’s voice was neutral, carefully so, she thought. Was he suggesting something untoward?

She scowled over her shoulder, though he probably couldn’t see it in the dark. She couldn’t see much of him except for a vague darkness against the wall. “We all know a lot about each other. We spend all day together then go out at night because...” She shrugged. “It’s like a family. A family where everyone has something in common and understands what the others are going through. Sometimes the men who are married don’t even get that kind of understanding at home.”

“I see. Well, I wasn’t suggesting that Zirkander was in this woman’s bed necessarily, but that she might be controlling him, possibly without his even knowing it. Most of the sorcerers of old were telepaths. Some specialized in beast control, and some of the ones who went rogue, who made everyone hate and fear sorcerers and want to get rid of them, could control people.”

“I still think that if someone showed up at his fortress with a glowing sword, the colonel would figure out something fishy was going on pretty quick. I don’t think your Cofah was a reliable witness, and I refuse to believe anything about magic until I see it for myself.”

“Hm. Do you know why Zirkander was sent to that fortress to start with? A ground-based fortress high in the mountains? Seems a strange place to send a pilot.”

Punishment, Cas thought with a guilty twinge. Because of that incident with the diplomat. Because of *her*. "He didn't tell us."

"Top-secret government movements, eh?" Something about Tolemek's voice said he knew she hadn't told the whole truth there. Too bad. She'd told him she would *consider* answering his questions; that was it.

"I guess. Lieutenants don't get included in many meetings."

"That much I believe." He grunted, as if at some memory of his own.

"Are we done with the question and answer session yet?"

"I've answered far more questions of yours than you have of mine."

"Yes, but you've given me fluffy fairy-tale answers about magic swords and sorceresses, neither of which has been seen in Iskandia for hundreds of years."

"Three hundred," Tolemek murmured.

Cas didn't ask him for clarification. She didn't want to admit that he might know more about her continent's history than she did. That subject hadn't been a passion of hers in school.

"One more question," he said. "Zirkander."

She tensed, not wanting to say anything more about him, fearing the little she'd said already constituted disloyalty.

"From what you've said so far, I'm gathering he's not an ass to work for," Tolemek said. "Is there any scenario in which you would..."

"Betray him? No."

"Help me get to him to ask him some questions," he said.

"Questions. Right. That's what you and your captain have wanted all along. To use me to get to him to *question* him."

"It's true that I originally saw you as a way to get to him to kill him, something that would... if not win me a spot in Cofah society again, at least make them think a little more kindly toward me. And it's true that Goroth wants him dead. With the vengeful fire of a thousand suns. But I... I don't know, Ahn. Or can I call you Caslin, now that I know your name?"

She hadn't given it to him and wondered when he had gotten it. It hardly mattered when she was leaning against him—damn, she didn't even remember doing that, but somehow the back of her head was resting against his chest again. Maybe she was just tired. And afraid of the moist, bumpy growth on the wall.

"Cas," she said.

"Ah, thank you. Cas, then. I have always considered Zirkander an enemy—as I told you, he's the reason I was cast out of the Cofah army—but time has worn away my bitterness, and I no longer imagine that his death would fill a great emptiness in my soul. I've had enough of death, to be frank. I also find myself reluctant to lose your... well, I

don't know if I have anything of yours, but I should not like to earn your utter hatred. Nor, given your accuracy with everything from pistols to rocks to hammocks turned into nets, would I want you gunning for me for the rest of my life."

She thought about telling him the net had been a trap, not anything she had shot or thrown, but waited to see what else he had to say instead.

"After hearing that soldier's story—and I saw the fear in his eyes when he relayed it, so I don't think it's as tall a tale as you believe—I'd like very much to find a way to speak to Zirkander and find out more about this woman."

"You want the sword," Cas guessed.

"If she *is* a sorceress, trying to take the sword could be suicidal. I might not be above trying to find some clever way to do so, I suppose. But if the weapon came out of those mines, not unlike your power crystals, maybe it's possible I can find one for myself. For my sister, actually. I mentioned her, I believe."

"Yes," Cas said, though she didn't know if she believed this sister was truly who he wanted the sword for. If there *were* such things as magic swords, and they were as powerful as he suggested, they would be worth a fortune. Or maybe he thought he could channel the sword's power for himself, for some new invention of his. Just because he had treated her fairly so far didn't mean she had seen the *real* man. "Here's the problem: I can't imagine the colonel wanting to sit down and have a chat with you, about sorceresses, swords, or even his latest toenail fungus. You and your pirate buddies are loathed where I come from. You especially."

"I know. I suppose that's where I see you coming in."

"Arranging a meeting?"

"Yes. Preferably without weapons."

"Uh huh." Cas turned around to face him. "Listen, Tolemek. I appreciate that you've been decent to me, and I believe that maybe you were thinking of letting me go back in that jungle, but on the other hand, I figure you're a bright fellow, and you could be telling me all the things you think will make me want to help you. Either way, what you want probably doesn't matter all that much when your captain is the man we're meeting at midnight and who is presumably taking us to Iskandia. And who is, as far as I've seen, the person you answer to."

A long moment passed, during which Cas hoped Tolemek would proclaim that he wasn't utterly loyal to the captain, but he eventually said, "Yes. He is."

"I won't ask why, because you didn't ask why I wouldn't think of betraying my colonel, but just in case you didn't know about it, I will

say, he told *me* that he's not afraid of you. That he's crossed you before and would do so again."

"I would not expect him to be afraid of me. He was my instructor at the proving grounds more than ten years ago. And when we both ended up cast out of the military, he was the one to offer me a position here. To allow me to do my research and explore my interests with minimal interference."

Cas thought he might go on to explain how and why the captain had crossed him before, but he either knew about it and was dismissing it or he didn't believe her statement. Uttering it a few more times wouldn't make him more likely to do so, so she didn't mention it again. Maybe she had planted a seed and she would get lucky. But she doubted it. Tolemek and the captain had seemed close from the beginning, and nothing in this conversation suggested otherwise.

"As long as you're following his orders..." Cas stopped herself before declaring that she wouldn't arrange anything between Tolemek and the colonel. She ought not be so honest with him if she was entertaining the idea of trapping him somehow. "That's a problem," she finished, since he could guess that much anyway. "Unless you'll consider leaving him."

"There is... nowhere else for me to go." His hand came up, brushing the side of her head, making her shiver a little, or maybe it was the poignant sense of regret that had entered his voice.

"I can understand wanting camaraderie, of a sort, and someone to watch your back, but don't you think it would be better to live alone than to live with villains?" Cas winced, because that sounded so condemning. But these pirates *were* villains; they weren't soldiers fighting for their country and couldn't simply be considered men on the other side of the war. Despite whatever circumstance or choice or fate that had brought them to this lifestyle, there was no denying that they were here, and they were committing crimes.

Tolemek lowered his hand and spoke so softly she almost missed the words. "Where else would a villain live but among other villains?"

She didn't know what to say to that.

Chapter 10

A few minutes before midnight, Tolemek led Cas out of the maze of ductwork and into the streets above. The fog had not only diminished; it had been turned off. Stars glittered overhead, and the horizon stretched for miles without a cloud in the sky. He supposed the administrators saw little point in expending energy to create the fog when the Iskandians knew exactly where they were. Presumably the outpost would move soon, but for now, repairs were underway. Lights burned on the ships in dock, and the sounds of hammers and rasping saws drifted on the breeze.

Tolemek hoped the industriousness meant that the bounty hunters had been called off Cas's trail, but he stuck to the alleys anyway, walking with caution toward the tavern the captain had named as a meeting point. Cas walked at his side, or slightly behind, not saying much. She hadn't since she had made the suggestion that he leave the pirates—and he had rejected it.

It was something he had considered in the past, after Tanglewood and Camp Eveningson in particular. He had gone off on his own for a month that time, but he had been hunted relentlessly by Iskandian and Cofah spies. And more than that, he had learned he hadn't the stomach for a life of solitude. When he had started to grow excited at the appearance of bounty hunters, realizing that they and their pursuit represented an odd sort of company, he had known he had to return. What was the point of creating and inventing if there was no one to share the results with? When Goroth had sent that note, saying he hadn't given away his cabin yet, Tolemek had been back within three days.

A part of him wondered if he should have been less honest with Cas, maybe playing along with the notion of leaving Goroth in the hope that she would consider arranging the meeting he sought. Or maybe in the hope that she would go back to leaning against him and letting him nuzzle her hair. That had been... pleasant. And she hadn't pushed him away. Of course, she hadn't exactly given the impression that she was enjoying his touch either.

Even so, when she had mentioned the idea of him leaving the

pirates, he had found himself wondering what he would do if she offered him a home in Iskandia. Not that she could. A lowly lieutenant would have no sway with her superior officers and certainly not with her government. She couldn't offer him refuge. To even defend him to her people would get her in trouble. Did the Iskandians have courts-martial? Probably.

"There's the Crow," Tolemek said, drawing her into the shadows of a dark storefront a couple of buildings down. "It's still standing, even if it doesn't look very busy. That's our meeting spot." He didn't head for it immediately. He had a feeling he shouldn't stroll in, not after he had been running around the station, knocking out pirates and helping a pirate enemy evade capture.

"There's someone in the shadows over there." Cas pointed toward the alley beside the Crow.

"Ah, good eyes."

But was that someone Goroth? Tolemek circled around the back of the store, so he would come out in the alley across the street from where the man was standing. He didn't have to guess as to the person's identity, for the figure met them halfway down the passage.

"Amazing how much trouble you can get into in a few hours," Goroth said.

"Is he talking to you or me?" Cas asked.

"*You* seem to only need a few minutes," he snarled, thrusting a finger toward her nose.

"Should that make me feel suboptimal?" Tolemek asked, hoping to lighten Goroth's mood. He didn't sound happy.

Goroth merely snarled. He had a couple of bulky bags slung over his shoulders, in addition to wearing all of his gear and weapons. "Neither of you better be seen on the outpost for a while. Come on. We've got a new ship."

"A new ship? I thought you were making repairs to the old one."

"We did. It's operational now." Goroth glowered over his shoulder at Cas. Fortunately, it was the most threatening thing he had done. His desire to strangle her must have waned somewhat in the intervening hours. "But we can't take the *Night Hunter* to the Iskandian capital."

"Sure you can," Cas said. "I'll even direct it past some nice wall-mounted cannons in the harbor that you might like to visit."

"You'll be on it with us, girl," Goroth growled. "I shouldn't think you'd want it shot down."

"It's a good thing she's not our pilot," Tolemek said. "She's not, is she?"

"No, I'm bringing Moonface and some other good men. Leaving Drakath in charge of the *Night Hunter*. Told him if he didn't take good care of the ship and turn it back over to me, he'd die horribly, due to a

booby-trap you've set to go off if anyone except me is commanding the ship for more than a week."

"Nice way to inspire your troops," Cas muttered, too softly for Goroth, in the lead, to hear. A good thing.

Tolemek merely said, "And here I've always wondered where these stories about my dastardliness started."

"They've served you well enough over the years."

Until recently. Ah, well.

"Speaking of dastardliness, I packed some of your supplies." Goroth unslung one of the bags on his shoulder and handed it to Tolemek.

Glass clinked inside. No vials with volatile contents, Tolemek hoped.

"I figure we'll need some of your tricks when we get there, so that we can accomplish—" Goroth glanced at Cas, "—what we need to accomplish."

Cas glared at him, but said nothing. As if she didn't know exactly what he had in mind.

"Yes," Tolemek murmured, thinking of his conversation with Cas, his proclamation that it wouldn't bother him if Zirkander went on living and her rebuttal that what he thought mattered little as long as he was going along with his captain. He had spoken the truth to her, but he secretly admitted that he would still prefer to see Zirkander dead rather than alive. It was cowardly, but the thought had crossed his mind that if he simply stepped back and let Goroth do the deed, Cas might not blame him. Or might at least forgive him some day.

They paused at the mouth of an alley, waiting for a repair crew to go by. Tolemek wondered if Cas thought it strange, seeing pirates marching about with toolboxes in hand and lumber balanced over their shoulders. After all the damage the outpost had endured that day, someone would have to take a supply-gathering trip if the station was to be repaired to its former glory. Not his problem at the moment.

When the route was clear, Goroth trotted across the street to a craft that was more dirigible than airship, with an enclosed cabin snugged below its massive gray balloon. Lanterns burned to either side of the extended gangplank, and Tolemek could just make out the Iskandian flag painted on the side of the envelope.

"You stole one of our freighters?" Cas asked.

"Actually I bought one of your freighters," Goroth said.

"From someone who stole it?"

Tolemek smirked, despite the exasperated look Goroth gave her. What did he expect? Love and respect from a prisoner?

"Will the *Night Hunter* be following along in the distance?" Tolemek asked as they walked up the gangplank—it was a wider and fancier version of the simple board their own ship employed, one that looked

like it folded and extended from the large double doors of the cabin itself. “In case we get into trouble? I imagine that even freighters flying Iskandian flags are boarded for inspection when they arrive in port. Especially if we’re angling for the capital.” He looked at Cas, wondering if she would offer a helpful answer, but she gave him nothing. No, she wasn’t going to help them infiltrate her homeland.

“Oh, they’ll be around.” Goroth’s grin had a wolfish aspect to it.

“What do you have planned?”

“Nothing that needs to be discussed in front of our prisoner.” Goroth pointed at Cas’s nose before unlocking the cabin door. “And I expect you to lock her up. Somewhere without any handy goop nearby for melting locks.”

Tolemek hated the idea of chaining Cas after all they had been through, but he understood Goroth’s wariness. Gods knew, she would escape and make trouble if she could. Right now, she was trotting along nicely, still wearing his six-shooters in her holsters, but where else did she have to go? Once they neared her homeland, there would be nothing keeping her from trying to flee.

“I will,” Tolemek said. He tried to give Cas an apologetic look, but didn’t know if it would be decipherable in the low lighting from the lanterns.

Goroth disappeared into the dirigible, and Tolemek extended a hand for Cas to follow. He brought up the rear. Judging from the clanking and thumping coming from the back of the cabin, someone was already inside. Lanterns were lit in the wood-paneled corridor and more light came from the navigation area up front. Goroth would have brought an engineer as well as a pilot, and perhaps a couple of other men as well. Tolemek itched to take him aside and find out what he had planned as far as backup went for this little invasion of theirs. Leading a small, secretive team into the city didn’t sound like a bad idea, but that wasn’t Goroth’s standard operating procedure. He liked to make a show of his attacks.

He had already stomped up to the navigation cabin and was talking to the pilot, so their chat would have to wait.

“Let’s find a room for you, shall we?” Tolemek asked.

Cas was standing at his shoulder.

“Room or cell?” she asked.

“I’m not entirely sure what to expect on an Iskandian freighter. Would they have cells for restraining prisoners?”

“Not likely. You might find a wine cellar for restraining the captain’s favorite vintages.”

A wine cellar? On a freighter vessel? Either she was joking or, “The centuries of war haven’t deprived your people as much as I would have guessed.”

She snorted and headed down the corridor, but not before taking a long peek toward the navigation cabin. As a pilot, she probably had an interest in anything resembling a cockpit.

"Can you fly a dirigible?" he asked.

"Yes, they taught us how to pilot everything at the academy. Not everyone gets picked for a flier squadron. There's actually quite a long waiting list. I was lucky to get selected for my first assignment right out of school."

"Because of your marksmanship skills?" At some point he would have to ask her about her father.

"Something like that."

Tolemek stopped in front of a cabin with the door open. Unlike some of the others, there weren't any bags or clothes tossed on the bunks. "Does this look acceptable?"

Cas peered through the doorway. "I don't know. I don't see any pipes running along the walls. Where will you chain me?"

"I thought I'd just lock the door. And..." He found himself reluctant to go on, but he had little choice. "And take your guns. Which are actually my guns, so you shouldn't miss them overmuch."

Wordlessly, Cas unfastened the belt and handed it to him. She didn't meet his eyes. She didn't looked any more irked than usual—in fact, she was going along with the situation without much objection—but her stance and the lack of heart in her quips made him feel like something had changed. Or gone back to the way it had been. Instead of sharing the adventure of escaping together, they were prisoner and master again, a role that suited him less and less with each passing hour.

"Cas..." He licked his lips, not sure what to say.

"Tolemek, you got that girl locked up yet?" came Goroth's voice from the navigation cabin. "We're taking off soon. And having a meeting."

Tolemek gazed at Cas, wishing...

She arched her brows. "Don't worry about me. This is the most comfortable prison I've been in for weeks." She walked over to the bottom of two bunks and flopped down on her back.

"Yell for me if you need anything."

"Some food would be nice. I haven't eaten since... I don't know when."

"I'll see what I can do."

She gave him a vague salute. He had the feeling that she wasn't sorry to see him go—she probably wanted to start plotting an escape. He glanced around the room, but aside from the bunks and an armoire bolted to the wall, its doors open to reveal it empty of clothing and anything else, there wasn't much to use to facilitate an escape.

Tolemek closed the door and was about to call to Goroth, asking about a key, when the captain appeared at his shoulder. He jangled a key ring.

"Allow me."

After locking Cas in, he headed for navigation again, tossing the ring on a hook near the exit as he passed. There were two seats up front, and Moonface, a graying man with big cheeks and a round face, already sat in one. An engineer and two fighters from the *Night Hunter* leaned against the wall. Goroth took the second seat. It was bolted to the floor but had the ability to swivel, and he spun around to face Tolemek.

"We've been cleared to depart," Moonface said, his hands tapping controls on a panel that stretched across the width of the cabin with all manner of gauges, levers, and buttons on it.

"Let's get going then." Goroth waved to him, though he never looked away from Tolemek. "While you were doing the gods know what with your prisoner, I was in a meeting, talking a number of the other captains into helping us. And helping themselves, of course." His wolfish smile returned. "The *Night Hunter* will follow us. And so will —" the smile broadened, "—the entire outpost. As soon as the majority of its repairs have been completed."

"The outpost?" Tolemek asked. "It's following us? To Iskandia?"

"Yes, as well as seven other heavily armed ships. As you might imagine, all of the Roaming Curse was riled after today's attack. Angry and hungry for blood. If not Zirkander's blood, then the blood of his people. With the help of your fog technology, they're going to attack the city."

"The capital city? There's nearly a million people there. And who knows how many troops? Their airbase and an army fortress are right there in the harbor."

The engineer was scratching his head at this revelation too. Moonface didn't look that surprised—he was guiding the dirigible away from the docking station, and his hands never stopped moving across the controls. The lights beyond the big glass viewing window were drifting off to one side, and the stars and the black night horizon stretched before them.

"Hence the need for the fog," Goroth said. "Which I promised you could deliver."

"I don't understand. Even if the outpost is shrouded by clouds, the soldiers in that city are going to catch on right away when bombs are being dropped from the sky. Their fliers will simply breach the fog the way they did this afternoon."

"Ah, but we're not going to put the fog around the outpost." Goroth smiled. "We're going to smother the city in it. Their fliers will have

trouble taking off and landing. None of the ground troops will be able to see our ships, so they won't be able to aim their weapons. Their defenses should be rendered far less effective than usual. The outpost and some of our ships will attack. Others will land and raid their museums, universities, shops, anything with valuables. It'll be a risky raid for them, but worth it if they can bring home a lot of loot."
Goroth leaned back in the chair, his hands clasped behind his head. "And while the rest of the pirates are busy doing that—effectively distracting the entire city—we, my friend, will locate Zirkander and kill him. Though not before we find out everything about that sorceress and figure out how to get that sword. And any other invaluable magical items we can get our hands on."

Despite the ludicrousness of this plan, Tolemek found himself intrigued by the idea of fogging in the city. Could it be done?

"Some techs dismantled the fog unit on the outpost, and I had it loaded on here. It's back in the engineering section."

Tolemek rubbed the back of his neck and stared thoughtfully at the deck. "I designed it to cover the outpost and the surrounding ships, but that's a much smaller footprint than an entire city. This will take some time and thought."

"Which I intend to give you," Goroth said. "But you'd better get to work. It's not that long of a flight to Iskandia."

Already mulling over potential modifications, Tolemek nodded and headed for engineering.

. . . . .

Cas poked into the armoire, checked under the bed, and tapped the walls, hoping for secret compartments full of tools, weapons, or something else she could use to escape. Oh, it wasn't as if she had somewhere to go, but she had a notion of sabotaging the engine, or perhaps the docking hooks—something that would cause a bumpy descent into the capital. If they crashed, the small crew would be scrambling, and she might be able to slip out at that moment. All she would need was ten minutes to run and tell the dock master that there were pirates in the city. Tolemek and his captain would be caught and executed for their crimes against the nation. The idea of a bullet shot into Tolemek's forehead disturbed her, but what choice did she have?

"He shouldn't have locked me in here if he wanted to live," she grumbled. More, he should have volunteered to leave his crusty captain and come over to her side. "Unrealistic expectations, L.T.," she sighed. "Unrealistic expectations."

She had to arrange her own escape before worrying about such things, anyway.

The doorknob rattled.

Surprised, Cas faced the exit. She hadn't expected someone to facilitate her escape. Ah, but maybe it was Tolemek bringing her something to eat. Except why would he turn the knob without first applying the key? He had been the one to lock the door; he had to know it would still be locked.

The knob rattled again, then someone knocked softly.

Hope swelled in her chest. It wasn't possible that someone was here, trying to rescue her, was it? But who? All of the Wolf Squadron fliers had departed, and since the cockpits only had room for one, it wasn't as if someone could have been dropped off.

No, whoever this was... she doubted it was a rescuer.

Cas cut out the lantern hanging by the door and climbed onto the top bunk. She might not know who was coming through the door, but it represented an opportunity, regardless.

Metal scraped against metal, a key being inserted in the lock this time. It turned, then clicked. The door was thrown open so hard it banged against the wall. An unfamiliar man lunged inside, pointing a pistol. Someone else lurked behind him in the corridor, glancing both ways. They both had the mismatched garb, scars, and tacky bone-and-teeth jewelry that she associated with the pirates. Enemies.

If Cas hadn't doused the lantern and climbed out of the line of sight, she might have been shot right away. She had a split second before the man's searching eyes located her, and she lashed out from her spot on the top bunk, kicking him in the face so hard that he staggered backward, dropping the pistol.

She jumped off the bed, pouncing on the weapon.

The first man had stumbled back into his comrade, who was trying to right him, or maybe push him aside to fire. Cas was faster. She snatched up the pistol and shot twice. She didn't know who these two hedgehogs were, but they clearly wanted her dead. She made sure they wouldn't want that—or anything else—again, then checked the pistol. Four more rounds.

She gnawed on her lip. She could get to the engineering room now, but Tolemek and the captain would charge out of navigation any second, having heard the gunfire. If she was going to sabotage something to set a trap, she wanted to do it stealthily, so they wouldn't be expecting the trap to be sprung later on.

More gunshots rang out, this time from the front of the ship. Someone screamed in pain, then a ringing thud sounded, followed by something heavy crashing to the ground. Maybe this hadn't been about her after all. Maybe someone was trying to take over the ship. To what ends, she didn't know, and she wasn't sure she cared, though a thread of worry wormed through her belly at the thought of Tolemek in trouble. He had been heading up to navigation for some

meeting, hadn't he?

More shots were fired, two from navigation, and then three more in rapid succession from the engineering room. Cas knelt and patted down the pair of dead attackers. She might need more than four bullets to handle whatever came at her next.

She found an ammo pouch and another pistol in a holster. Since she didn't have any pockets, she took the moment to unfasten one of the men's weapons belts and claimed it for her own. More sounds of fighting reached her ears, both from up front and from the engineering area. She thought about staying where she was and seeing what happened, but an image of Tolemek bleeding on the floor flashed into her mind.

"Hope I don't regret this," she whispered.

Stepping over the dead men, Cas headed for navigation first, thinking he was most likely to be up there. Another shout came from that direction, followed by a gunshot. She didn't hear any noises in the side corridor that led to the ship's exit, and it was dark in that direction, so she only glanced that way and continued toward the navigation door—unlike when she first entered, it was shut.

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and realized her mistake immediately. She ducked and fired at the same time.

Something leaped out of the darkness and slammed into her, taking her to the ground. Metal glinted, reflecting the orange of the nearest lantern. A knife? She fired again, her barrel pressed into someone's abdomen.

A hand like a claw gripped her shoulder. She pushed and kicked at the man—she'd already shot him once, if not twice. He couldn't possibly want more of her. But her opponent was huge, protected by layers of blubber. His hand tightened, and his other arm raised, a dagger clenched in his fist.

On her back and jammed against the wall, Cas kicked out again, aiming for the blade this time. Her foot connected, and the weapon flew out of the man's hand.

She expected to hear it clunk off the wood paneling or clatter to the floor, but someone gasped instead. Not daring to glance away, Cas fired into her assailant's gut one more time. Finally, the claw-like grip on her shoulder slackened. Even though he had stopped fighting, pushing him off was like moving a log. She squirmed out, nearly losing her prison tunic in the process. Blood coated her hands and her body.

"Got him, Moon," came the captain's voice from the navigation room.

Someone had opened the door.

Cas scrambled to her feet, but didn't take more than a step before

halting in stunned silence. The dagger. It had flown from her attacker's hands and cut into the throat of someone walking—or maybe fleeing—out of navigation. The man—she thought she recognized him from passing by him on the *Night Hunter*—was leaning against the wall, clutching at his neck with both hands. Blood poured between his fingers.

She stared in horror, less because he was dying—there were men dying all around her—but more at the freakishness of the accident. She couldn't have known the knife would strike someone; she'd only been defending herself.

The captain charged out of the navigation room, his temple bleeding and more blood spattering his garish bone breastplate. He had a pistol clutched in his hand, and when his gaze landed on Cas, she lowered into a tense crouch. She was still armed. If he aimed his pistol at her...

Hells, why wait? This man was a criminal. She didn't know who these intruders were, but if she could fire first, she could eliminate the biggest obstacle in her path to freedom. He stared at her, his hand tightening on his own pistol, as if he read every thought in her mind.

A gurgle came from the man with the cut throat. He stretched out a blood-drenched hand, then collapsed.

At the same moment, footsteps sounded behind Cas. Fearing some new enemy, she backed into the cross corridor, the narrow stub that led to the dirigible's exit doors. She never took her eyes off the captain. He glanced toward the dying man, his empty hand twitching in that direction, as if he wanted to help.

Now. This was her chance.

But Tolemek charged into view, with a burly man on his heels. He too was armed, and blood smeared one of his arms. His own? Or someone else's? She didn't see any wounds on him, but couldn't tell for sure.

Whether intentionally or not, she didn't know, Tolemek stepped between her and the captain. "What happened?"

Reluctantly, Cas lowered her weapon.

"Moonface is dead," the captain said. "Torin too. *That's* what happened."

"One of these intruders almost cleaved my skull in half with an axe," Tolemek said. "Who are these people?" He looked at Cas.

"I have no idea, but two of them charged into my room," she said. "After trying the door, finding it locked, then going off to locate a key. It seemed rather deliberate."

"All this to get at you?" Tolemek stretched a hand toward the dead pirates. "The bounty they placed on your head isn't *that* big."

"Maybe someone didn't like my idea." The captain touched his

temple and scowled up and down the corridor. “I thought I had everyone going along with it, sold them on the notion of looting—” he glanced at Cas. “Nobody openly objected.”

Cas glowered at him. Looting *what*? Going after the colonel wasn’t enough? Now, these cretins had another scheme they were planning? Why hadn’t she shot the captain when she had the chance? Her hand flexed around the pistol’s grip. Tolemek was still standing between the two of them. She turned her glower onto him, but he was looking at the dead men in the corridor instead of her.

“Even if they didn’t agree with your idea,” he mused, “what would killing us do? Didn’t you already set things in motion?”

“Yes. Yes, I did. And we’re not discussing it further here.” The captain pushed past Tolemek and lunged toward Cas.

She lifted the gun, stepping back to put more space between them so she could shoot, but her shoulder rammed against the corner of the intersection. The captain moved more quickly than she had anticipated, too, smacking the pistol out of her hand. He grabbed her before she could decide if she should duck and try to dart after the weapon. As soon as his hand wrapped around her forearm, she knew it was too late. She had missed her chance. Fool, why had she hesitated? For Tolemek’s sake? That was ludicrous.

“Congratulations.” The captain sneered at her. “You’re our pilot now.”

Chapter 11

Dawn was bleeding pink into the sky beyond the portholes when Tolemek, yawning so hard his jaw cracked, made his way up to the navigation cabin. One of Goroth's fighters had dragged the bodies of the dead into an empty cabin, but smears of blood painted the walls and the floor. That was going to be hard to explain to an inspection team. As was the big fog-making machine sitting on the deck in engineering. Tolemek had finished his modifications, but he needed to tell Goroth that there wasn't enough of the murk-making materials to last long, especially not if they planned to blanket the whole city. Or maybe he didn't need to tell Goroth. Maybe he ought not to help this scheme along too much. Hadn't he caused Iskandia enough grief already?

Sighing, he pushed his hair back over his shoulders and opened the navigation door. He was relieved to find Goroth and Cas sitting in the chairs, if not in amiable silence then at least with neither sporting any new bruises. He had been reluctant to leave them alone when Goroth sent him back to finish his work in engineering, especially after catching them in the corridor with guns almost aimed at each other instead of at the injured foes on the floor.

Goroth waved him in, a sandwich in his hand. "You're just in time, Mek." He smiled, oddly chipper, considering he hadn't slept all night, either, unless he had dozed up here, but he doubted he would dare leave Cas unattended. A pilot could do all manner of sabotage.

"Oh?" Tolemek asked.

Cas smiled over her shoulder at him, a surprisingly cheerful and agreeable smile. In other words, one Tolemek had yet to see from her. A queasy feeling came over him that had nothing to do with the grayish colored meat dangling from between Goroth's pieces of bread. There was a crumb-decorated plate on the control panel beside Cas too. In all the chaos, Tolemek had forgotten to bring her a meal. Had she found a chance to eat the day before? She hadn't in the hours she had been with him. She must have been ravenous. Ravenous enough to accept food from her mortal enemy? Goroth was clearly eating from the same plate, but he was tricky enough that he could have inserted

something into one sandwich unseen.

"Yes," Goroth said, "we're about to have a chat, me and your pilot friend here."

"About?"

"Zirkander. Where he lives. Who he knows of the magical-sword wielding persuasion."

Instead of tightening her lips and glaring the way she usually did when someone tried to extract information on Zirkander, Cas nodded and smiled again.

Tolemek closed his eyes, feeling sick. Goroth had been in his laboratory, had even packed a bag for him. Slipping a few vials of the truth serum into a pocket would have been easy. After all the years they had worked together, Goroth knew about most of Tolemek's formulas and where he kept them. Applying the liquid serum to something like bread or meat would be difficult, but... he eyed a smudge of mustard on Goroth's upper lip and fought the urge to think bull's-eye and punch him.

"Don't look so irritated, my old friend," Goroth said. "You want this information too. I know it. Zirkander for me. Sword for you, yes?" He held out a fist, inviting the clashing of knuckles pirates sometimes did to seal deals.

Though his hackles were up at the idea of tricking Cas into betraying herself, he couldn't bring himself to walk back out and leave the questioning to Goroth. Tolemek *did* want the information. She might hold the answers, however inadvertent her knowledge, that could lead him to the prize at the end of his years-long quest. And this was a better way to get those answers than through brutal means, wasn't it? That was why he had invented the serum after all.

Wordlessly, Tolemek bumped knuckles with Goroth, then leaned against the wall beside the door. He opened his palm toward Cas, inviting his friend to do the questioning. Tolemek knew everything about the serum, so he knew Cas would remember this later. He couldn't bring himself to be the one who asked her to betray herself, though he supposed all that made him was a coward. She wouldn't likely think any more highly of him for standing in the background and listening, for not doing anything to stop this.

Goroth finished his sandwich and rotated in his chair to face Cas, his hands on his knees, his face intent. "So, Lieutenant, is there anything you'd like to share about your commanding officer? Colonel Zirkander?"

"I don't think so. Why?" Cas smiled.

Tolemek grunted, amused by the scowl that flashed across Goroth's face. Maybe she would find a way to fight the effects of the serum. He doubted it though. He had made it well and tested it often.

“Where does he live?” Goroth asked.

“On the army base behind the pilots’ barracks, Griffon Street. He and the other senior officers have little cottages there. His is the third house after the fountain, south side.”

Goroth plucked a notepad off the control panel and scribbled down the information. He had come in prepared, it seemed. Beyond the window, the sun was coming up, and the sea below gleamed beneath its warm rays. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, though a red hue to the horizon made Tolemek suspect a storm might be coming. Too bad it wasn’t there now. Goroth wouldn’t have dared question his only pilot if she had been busy keeping them from being struck by lightning or blown off course.

“He also has a cabin on a lake,” Cas volunteered. “That’s his, not military quarters. I haven’t been there, though, so I’m not sure exactly how to find it. I think it’s a couple of hours out of the city by horse.”

“Guess that answers one of my questions,” Goroth told Tolemek.

Tolemek lifted his brows—he hadn’t gotten anything out of that addendum, except that Cas wasn’t holding back information anymore.

“Whether or not she’d slept with him,” Goroth explained. “I can’t imagine how someone so young would get onto Wolf Squadron otherwise.”

He couldn’t *imagine* another explanation? Hadn’t he seen her shoot? Tolemek glowered.

“I was actually hoping that would be the case,” Goroth went on. “Then Zirkander would be more attached to her, and she would work even better as bait for a trap. You know how stupid men get when they come to care about women.”

Tolemek would have had to have been stupid and deaf to miss Goroth’s censure for him in that comment. He folded his arms across his chest and said nothing.

“No,” Cas sighed. “He never asked. I used to wish he would. A lot.”

The admission struck Tolemek like a dagger to the heart, and he forgot all about Goroth. For whatever reason—the age difference, maybe, or the fact that she never got dreamy-eyed mentioning the man—Tolemek hadn’t suspected she might have romantic feelings for Zirkander. His head thunked back against the wall. Apparently, instead of asking her if she would pick Iskandian lads with nice hair over him, he should have been asking about infamous pilots.

“After I got out of flight school and joined the squadron, it didn’t take long to see he thinks of us all like little brothers and sisters.” Her disappointed face… erg, she was twisting the knife and didn’t even know it.

Goroth was stroking his chin. Doubtlessly mulling over whether a “little sister” would be effective bait for a trap.

"How *did* you get selected for the squadron?" Goroth asked.

"Me? Zirkander picked me. It wasn't... an obvious choice." She waved to Tolemek, her face gone wry. "Nobody else wanted me. I thought I'd be lucky to get a job swabbing the hangar deck. I never even would have gotten accepted to flight school, if the colonel hadn't stepped in on my behalf."

"Why?" Tolemek found himself asking, despite his resolution to leave the questioning to Goroth.

Cas shrugged. "Because of my father. On the official city records, he's just a bodyguard who specializes in security services—" she rolled her eyes, "—but everyone knows he's killed some important people, some criminals, yes, but some who weren't. Anyone in the government who had a problem with his career, or with *him*... well, they had a tendency to disappear. Apparently people decided it was best to leave him alone and pretend he didn't exist." Another shrug. "It wasn't any secret that he was raising me to follow in his footsteps—good money, he always said, job security. Someone always wants someone else dead. I'm not sure that was always his plan, but after the fire—after my mother was killed by a vengeful relative of someone he'd killed—he wanted to make sure I could take care of myself. It suited me fine as a kid—he spent time with me, in the city and out in the woods, and we practiced hitting any and every kind of target. It was fun. It wasn't until I was older that I learned it was a little strange to teach a little daughter to use guns instead of to play with dolls. But I didn't care, not until the targets shifted from bales of hay to living, breathing things." For the first time in the interview—for the first time since she had consumed the truth serum—her expression grew pained. She looked away from Tolemek and out the window. "I didn't want to be a sniper after that. Growing up, he'd taught me to distance myself from emotion somewhat, to not dwell that much on the pain and feelings of others, thinking that was a wonderful thing. I suppose it is if you want to kill people for a living. And I have to admit, he did a good enough job that it wasn't empathy that made the job unacceptable to me. I just didn't want to do it for money. And I didn't want to kill people who were targets just because someone *had* money. If I was going to do it, I wanted it to matter. When the Cofah started coming more often, and our reprieve from the war seemed to be over, I realized I wanted to use my skills to protect people. I wanted to protect our country. What was the point of money if the world was in ruins?" She turned her eyes back on Tolemek, her expression beseeching. Her voice dropped, and she whispered, "I tried to explain my feelings to him, but he said I was being foolish. That if things got too bad, we could leave the country and find another place for our business. He didn't understand. I ran away from home. I was sixteen at the time.

He didn't come after me; guess he figured I'd be back, or that I would figure out that I didn't have many other skills to rely upon, so I wouldn't be able to make it without him and his money and his job contacts."

Tolemek found himself listening to the story in fascination as the words flew out of her, in part because he cared—whether she ever would reciprocate that feeling or not—but also because his own father had been such a problematic figure in his life. He thought Goroth might be scoffing or cleaning his fingernails throughout this tale, but he was hard to read at the moment. He was listening and watching her though.

"In a way, he was right," Cas said. "I didn't have a lot of friends—our house was on the outskirts of the city, and I don't think it ever occurred to him that a child should have peers to play with when growing up—so I really had no one to turn to. Not many friends of the family either, oddly." Her lip quirked. "I ended up living on the street down near the harbor—it's not the best area for a girl—and stealing to eat. I saw an army officer walking after dark, wearing a leather cap with goggles up on his forehead and looking lost in his thoughts. I wasn't dumb enough to try and steal from someone with military training, but some ten-year-old boy was—and got caught. I figured the officer would either knock the wings off the kid's flier or turn him over to the law. Instead, they ended up in this in-depth conversation about some air battle or another, and the officer and boy were soon using dented cans and other street litter to represent airships and fliers. All this in the middle of one of the worst neighborhoods in the city. I later learned that the man had grown up there and didn't see it the way others did. At the time, I crept closer, curious about him, and I got caught up in the story of this air battle too. He was a good storyteller. Near the end of it, this pack of street toughs walked up, brothers or cousins or some relation to the boy, and one of them told the officer to give him those fancy goggles and how they would take them if he didn't. They all had pitted knives and homemade clubs. They figured they were what passed for fierce in that area."

Cas glanced at Tolemek's bracers and Goroth's breastplate before quirking her lips again and continuing on. "The officer said he'd prefer to keep his goggles, so they'd have to take them if they wanted them. I'm not sure what I was thinking, but I grabbed a fistful of rocks and started pelting those thugs. My aim's decent."

Tolemek grunted, imagining these kids taking rocks in the eyes.

"They decided they didn't want to deal with me *and* the officer, so they ran off. The boy ran off too. The officer—I later learned this was Zirkander, of course—turned around, at which point I caught a glimpse of a gun holstered under his jacket. I felt silly, but he tipped

his cap, gave me his name, and thanked me for my help. He also suggested that I ought to sign up for the military. I lied about my age and did so the next day. Under an abbreviated version of my father's name. I served two years, and nobody figured out who I was—and my father never bothered me, though he must have known where I was—until someone recommended I take the officer candidacy exams and apply to flight school so I could take my marksmanship skills into the air. At that point, there were background checks. I arranged to cross Zirkander's path again, explained my situation and that I didn't want anything to do with the family business, and that I'd be a good officer. He remembered me—I wasn't sure if he would—and vouched for me. Four years later, when I graduated, I heard that my father had made a threat or two, and that nobody wanted me assigned to his unit. I guess he hadn't minded when I was soldiering and studying—he probably still thought I'd end up working with him and that the military training couldn't hurt—but he thought only fools volunteered to throw themselves into the sky. And it's true that there aren't a lot of pilots who live long enough to retire, not when we've been a target for the Cofah for as long as anyone can remember." She gave Tolemek a dirty look. He wondered why Goroth didn't receive a similar look, but she had been telling most of this story to Tolemek with only a few glances to the side. "Anyway, in the end, the colonel was the one who took me. I have no idea what kind of conversations he may or may not have had with my father over the last year and a half, but he's definitely not someone to back down to bullies. Or superior officers he doesn't respect, either." She grinned. "I don't think my father would go after him, anyway. That's one assassination the government wouldn't look the other way for. There are a lot of people who would avenge his death." Her grin disappeared, and she glared at Tolemek and Goroth again.

Goroth didn't appear fazed by this threat. In fact, he leaned back in his chair and smiled at Tolemek. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"What?"

Goroth jerked a thumb at Cas. "She's *better* than some lay. The little sister whose career Zirkander has shaped. He'll risk his life to protect her. I'll bet my left arm on it."

Little sister. Tolemek had never spoken of his own little sister to anyone in the Roaming Curse; Goroth couldn't know what such words—such a relationship—meant to him.

"Then that is good for your plans," Tolemek said softly.

"For *our* plans. Don't worry, I'll let you question him about the sword and the witch before I kill him."

"Good."

If the bluntness of Goroth's words bothered Cas, she didn't show it. Still under the serum's influence, she would still be feeling mellow and amenable—what glares and glowers she had given them hadn't been heartfelt, not like her usual expressions of scathing loathing. No, she was busy gazing out the window. And dreaming about unrequited love?

Tolemek left the navigation room. He had much to think about.

. . . . .

Cas woke from a nap, still sitting in the pilot's chair. The dirigible moved with the elegance and swiftness of a turtle, so she doubted she had missed anything, but she checked all the gauges and took a reading nonetheless. A stolid guard leaned against the wall by the door. For some reason, she had expected Tolemek there, and she paused in her check, trying to reconcile fuzzy thoughts. She had dreamed that she was telling the story of her life—and of meeting Zirkander—to him and his captain. But it had only been a dream, hadn't it? She wouldn't share her past with those two, especially not Captain Slaughter.

Then her gaze swept across the empty chair beside her... and the plate full of crumbs sitting in it.

"It wasn't a dream," she whispered, something between horror and terror snarling into a knot in her stomach. What had she told them? About meeting Zirkander, yes. More? Anything about the unit, their strategies? Her thoughts were so fuzzy. Tolemek's truth drug, that's what it had been. Had he been the one to put it in her food? She hadn't thought bread and meat could be tainted so, and the captain had eaten from that plate, too, letting her select a sandwich first. Had he doused all of the food, not caring if he ended up telling some truth? Probably. That bastard. Seven gods, she'd given them the colonel's address, hadn't she? She scraped through her thoughts, trying to remember what else she had given Slaughter. And *Tolemek*. He had stood right there and watched the captain interrogate her. Even though she knew they had been captor and prisoner from the beginning, and their goals were at odds with each other, she couldn't help but feel betrayed. Why had he treated her decently, with *respect*, all along when he was just going to step aside and allow something like this to happen?

"You're to keep on course for the Iskandian capital," her guard said.

"Yeah, yeah." Cas glanced down her form. As suspected, no pistols graced her waist, nor was she carrying so much as a knife on her belt. She slid her hand across the control panel, mulling over what sabotage she might manage from here, sabotage that she might walk away from

and which they wouldn't.

Or...

Was it her duty to make sure they didn't reach the harbor and threaten Zirkander, even if it meant her own life? By crashing the dirigible into the ocean? The captain was up to something that went beyond whatever he planned for the colonel. Would it end with the loss of his life? Those people who had stowed away and jumped them, she didn't think they had been there for her. Slaughter had suggested as much himself. She needed to find out what they had been trying to stop, then find a way to escape her captors and get to the colonel first. Or she had to crash the dirigible and make sure none of these pirates ever made it to her homeland. And she only had... she glanced at the chronometer and her location calculators. She had lost the entire morning to that truth serum idiocy. It was an hour past noon, and she had less than six hours until they reached Iskandia. This time of year, it should be dark by then. She eyed controls for landing lights. She might be able to flash out a message, using the Korason Alphabet. Assuming someone was paying attention. If she landed at the military air base, they would be, but freighters came in farther up the harbor, over the civilian docking area.

Flashing a message in the sky wouldn't be enough to guarantee the captain's plan failed. A crash. That could be enough. Even if she didn't walk away from it. Wasn't she on borrowed time anyway? Hadn't she almost died three weeks ago? Maybe it was meant to be.

The door opened, and Tolemek walked inside.

Cas gave him a single icy glare, then avoided looking at him. His face was unreadable, regardless. He probably didn't care about her feelings toward him.

"Take a break, Orfictus," Tolemek told the guard. "Grab some lunch. I'll keep an eye on her."

"Yes, sir."

The guard walked out, and Tolemek kicked the door shut. He moved the plate, sat in the other seat, and faced Cas. She continued to study the controls, though they weren't all that engaging. Piloting a dirigible took considerably less skill and concentration than handling a flier.

"I doubt you're of a mind to accept it," Tolemek said, "but I would like to offer an apology."

He was right. She wasn't of a mind to accept it. And she wasn't of a mind to acknowledge his presence, either.

"Goroth doctored your food without my knowledge. When I realized what had happened... I shouldn't have stayed and had anything to do with the questioning, but I wanted to stay to make sure he didn't go too far."

Cas gave him a scathing look. Making her betray her commander, that wasn't going too far? Or having her make a fool of herself by talking about silly infatuations? What was? She didn't ask. She didn't want to hear anything he had to say right now. She refocused on the instrument panel.

"Listen, Cas, please." Tolemek leaned his elbows on his thighs, interlaced his fingers, and gazed intently at her. "I need your help."

She glanced at him, despite her determination not to. That wasn't what she had expected him to say. "After you let your captain drug me and question me, you want my help?"

"I believe you might want a chance to get him back, and I can use that."

"How?"

Tolemek held up a small vial, his tidy writing on the label: Truth Serum. It was empty.

"That's what was used on me?" Cas asked.

"It's another vial. The contents are in the wine he's drinking right now."

Cas kept her face neutral, kept herself from smiling or doing anything that would reveal the hope in her breast. Maybe this was just some new trick. Either way, it didn't mean he was thinking of coming over to her side. It just meant... what? That he wanted some information.

"I expect he'll be back up here after he has his lunch. I want you to question him about something for me. You'll have about a one-hour window while he's under the influence of the serum."

"Question him about what?" Cas asked. "And why can't you do it?"

"I've questioned him about this before. He'll be wary of talking about this subject with me, to the point where he might be able to guard the truth, even under the influence of the serum."

"You think he'll tell the truth to *me*? Why?"

"Your opinion doesn't matter to him. And because," — Tolemek looked hard into her eyes, as if he could read her thoughts through them, "—according to you, he already told you he betrayed me once."

"Oh." Cas hadn't been sure he had heard those words or, in hearing them, hadn't dismissed them immediately. She couldn't read him at all at the moment. Was this to be some test? To see if she had been lying? Trying to turn him against the captain? She licked her lips, nervous even though she *hadn't* been lying. But she *had* been hoping he might choose her over his commanding officer of countless years. "So you want me to ask what that betrayal was?"

"Yes."

He kept staring into her eyes. It made her feel like squirming, but she didn't look away. She was the honorable person here, not his

conniving captain.

"Anything else?" she asked when several seconds had whispered past.

"Yes." Tolemek stared down at the empty vial, rotating it a few times between his fingers. "If he mentions Tanglewood or Camp Eveningson, get the details."

He stood to leave, but Cas stopped him with a raised hand. "What's Camp Eveningson?"

"The Cofah equivalent of Tanglewood. And the reason I can never go home again." Tolemek took two steps, then paused with his hand on the door latch. "I'll be listening."

After he left, Cas faced the control panel again. Dampness slicked her palms. Why? This wasn't her trial. Unless the captain figured out what she was up to and shot her. She grimaced. How had she gotten herself stuck in the middle of this? And what line of questions could she ask to get Slaughter to incriminate himself? Would the truth be enough by itself? If she could make Tolemek her ally, everything changed.

The guard returned, wordlessly taking up his spot beside the door. Maybe Tolemek's plotting would be for naught. Maybe the captain hadn't drunk his afternoon wine. Or maybe he had taken a nap afterward and didn't care what was going on in navigation. Maybe—

The door opened.

The captain walked in, ambled to the open chair, and sat down, kicking his heels onto the control panel. Relaxed now, was he? "How's our progress, pilot?"

"Six hours to the capital."

"So we'll arrive at night? Good, good."

Cas chewed on her lip and thought about how to bring up Tolemek's concerns. Did she need to wait first, to make sure the serum had taken effect? Did she need to ease into the questioning? *He* hadn't, she recalled. He had bluntly asked about the colonel and she had burbled out... far more than she wanted them to know. Far more than she wanted anyone to know, damn them. She could kill the captain for the mere fact that he possessed her secrets.

The guard walked out. Odd. He hadn't asked for permission. Even odder, the captain hadn't seemed to notice. His hands were folded across his stomach, and he continued to gaze out the viewport, a contented expression on his face.

Time to start.

"So," Cas said, "you want Zirkander, and Tolemek wants the sword. What happens if those two mission goals end up being mutually exclusive?" She looked at Slaughter, but only so she could see the door out of the corner of her eye. Tolemek had said he would be

listening. But if he wasn't in the room, how could he? Ah, the door was cracked open a hair.

"They won't be," Slaughter said.

Cas looked forward again, not wanting to risk drawing the captain's attention toward the door. "But what if they are? What if Zirkander is the only one with information on the sword, and in killing him, Tolemek loses all chance of learning about it?"

The captain shook his head. "Not going to happen."

"But if it did... you said you'd betrayed him before." Cas held her breath. Was that enough of a leading line? Or would he be able to ignore it?

He gave her an annoyed look, though it lacked the fire of the expressions he had launched at her previously. "For his own good."

"For his own good? Or for yours?" She was guessing, having no idea about their past.

"Both."

"What happened? That time you betrayed him."

"I recruited him, you know. Heard about his disgrace in the Cofah army—it wasn't unlike my own—and offered him a position with the pirates. I was actually a first mate then, and my own position was tenuous, but I praised him to my captain, explained what skills he could bring to the ship. I'd known him when he was a student at the proving grounds, seen that infantry was a long way from his passion and that he had only gone into the military because of his father." Slaughter looked at her, his eyes bleary as if he wasn't sure who she was.

Cas gave him an encouraging grunt. This wasn't what she had asked, but she remembered how the serum had made her ramble as well and how she had—unfortunately—gotten around to sharing what they wanted. Besides, she admitted a certain curiosity in regard to Tolemek's past.

"He *should* have been a research scientist," Slaughter said. "I had a hunch that if I could bring him on board, we could team up, work together, and take the ship from the captain. I'd lost everything when I was forced out of the army, the same as him. Even more so than him. He had been discharged, and I... well, that doesn't matter now. My plan worked. With his potions, we were able to take down the captain without much of a fight, and we made the ship ours. Mine, I should say. He didn't care about commanding anyone again. He just wanted to be left alone to do his research. Although he did have this odd notion of being accepted back by the Cofah. Or maybe by his father. You'll have to get him to tell you that story. I don't know it in full. I just know he became the emperor card I kept up my sleeve. He was dangerous, and I made sure everyone knew it. People left us alone

that way."

"You were always intent on helping him then?" Cas asked, though she hoped the answer was no. "You never truly betrayed him? Were you lying to me?"

"I was always helping him, yes."

Disappointed, Cas fiddled with a control lever.

"Even when he didn't think I was," Slaughter added.

"Such as... at Camp Eveningson?" She didn't know why she picked that name instead of Tanglewood. Maybe because it meant nothing to her and the details, one way or another, wouldn't make her gut writhe.

"Yes. He had concocted this... weapon, I suppose you would call it." Slaughter closed his eyes, his head back in the chair. "A weapon in a metal canister, a little rocket really. It was designed to shoot up into the air over a populated area and distribute some kind of gas that people would inhale and that would kill them. He said... and I still remember this vividly, because it was a real sign of how out of touch with reality people like him can be... he said, if there were an incredibly deadly weapon in the world, something capable of destroying millions of lives, less people would die."

"How so?" Cas whispered, chilled but wanting—needing—to understand too.

"Because if something so horrible existed, there would be no need to use it. People would give up. You don't fight something like that. He was going to give it to the Cofah, and then they could finally bring the Iskandians back under their sway. Forever." Slaughter gave her a big, unfriendly smile.

Cas rubbed her face. *This* was the truth Tolemek had wanted her to hear?

"He was still a little irked with the Iskandians for destroying his career at the time. And he wanted his life back, access to his homeland, a hero's return to his city. He thought he'd get that if he handed them the ultimate weapon. But I knew him. Better than he knew himself. He was just a kid then. Twenty-five, I think."

Cas debated whether to point out that she was twenty-three. She decided to keep her mouth shut. He was rambling his way toward the end of the story, from the point of view Tolemek wanted.

"He was going to arrange some test for an administrator using—I don't know. Monkeys, something like that. He'd never tried this toxin on humans, but he thought monkeys would be close enough. We happened to have two spies in the Roaming Curse. One Iskandian. One Cofah. We're a big outfit. Spies are common. Sometimes we even know who they are and play them against each other." He opened an eye and grinned at her.

He didn't know she wanted to wrap her hands around his throat and direct him back to the point.

"I told our spies about Mek's concoction. Or rather, I told other people about it where the spies could hear."

"Had he sworn you to secrecy?"

"Oh, yes. But I was always going around, driving terror into people on his behalf, so they would leave him alone."

"And leave you alone too?" Cas asked.

"Yes, there was some of that. I won't lie. I've benefited tremendously from having the Deathmaker at my back. This is when he got that nickname, you know. Each of the spies stole canisters from him, and each of them went out to test it on the enemy nation. I couldn't have designed things better myself if I'd been giving them orders. This way, both governments would know exactly how effective his concoction was. Dead monkeys wouldn't drive fear into men's hearts."

"I don't understand," Cas said. "Why would you tell both sides? Didn't you have any loyalties?"

"Not even remotely. That's what a pirate is. Someone too jaded for loyalties, someone who isn't going to let some government lead him around with a bit in his mouth. You're only out for yourself out here, and the sooner you're honest about that, the sooner you'll make a life you like." Slaughter shrugged. "Looking back, I wouldn't have done it again. It was horrible. From hearing him talk about it, I didn't truly grasp how awful of a weapon he'd created. I don't think he did, either, honestly. We flew to your Tanglewood—when he learned that the spies had stolen his vials, he wanted to chase after them and retrieve them. We didn't make it in time. We saw the aftermath. And that scared me pissless. I was sure when we got down there that we'd be affected by the toxin, too, and be dead before we got back to the ship. It had dissipated by that point though. Still, it was a long time before I went into his cabin—into that laboratory of his—after that."

Cas wondered if this was the same version of the story that Tolemek had heard. Or had he only known about the spies and not how his captain had deliberately fed them information?

"Camp Eveningson was the same," Slaughter said. "Disturbingly horrible. Mek disappeared for a while after that. I didn't know if he would come back—or if he would do something drastic to himself. While he was gone, I made sure the governments knew who was responsible."

"Er, why?"

"So they would know not to bother the Roaming Curse."

"I don't get it," Cas said. "Weren't you afraid they would hunt him down for his crimes?"

“I thought they’d be too afraid to bother him. And it was mostly true. There were some bounty hunters, but the big threats, men like your pa, were too smart to go after him. That’s what I heard anyway. That someone offered Ahnsung the job, and he refused. Might just be a rumor though. All I know was that after Mek came back, nobody bothered him. And after he got over his funk, he stuck with me. He didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

Cas considered him, wondering how long she had until the serum wore off. “Are you sure that wasn’t part of your plan all along? To make sure his invention didn’t turn him into some government’s hero, or savior, or dark little secret kept in the basement? To make sure both parties were too upset to consider working with him? So that he wouldn’t stray from your side? He’s *your* secret weapon, after all. You need him to ensure your continued power amongst a fleet of bloodthirsty men.”

Slaughter’s eyes were closed again. He yawned and said, “You talk too much, woman.”

Please, he had been the one babbling.

“But I’m not wrong, am I?” Cas glanced toward that cracked door. She had heard enough to form her own opinion on the matter, but she wanted the captain to make a beyond-question, self-condemning statement.

“He’s my secret weapon,” Slaughter agreed softly.

Cas wondered if that had been enough of a confession. Tolemek, if he was indeed standing out there, didn’t barge in. In fact, when the door opened a few minutes later, it was the guard who returned. Cas didn’t catch a glimpse of anyone else in the corridor. Had she accomplished anything at all with her probing?

“One last question,” she whispered, hoping the guard wouldn’t hear or wouldn’t think anything of it. “What are you planning to do to my city? Besides find Colonel Zirkander?”

Boots still up, Slaughter laced his hands behind his neck and smiled. “Invade it, of course. And destroy it. With Tolemek’s help.”

Cas stared at the control panel in horror. If she didn’t do something to stop them, there would be pirates assaulting the city by midnight. She had to crash the ship before it reached the harbor. No choice.

Chapter 12

The lights of the capital came into view on the dark horizon, the bright pinpoints close and dense in the miles around the harbor, then growing more sparse as they traveled into the hills beyond. Heavy clouds had gathered in the sky overhead, but the rain—or maybe it would be snow here in Iskandia—hadn't started yet. Winds already batted at the dirigible, and Cas had to keep a hand on the controls to stay on course.

At the northern end of the harbor, atop Pinnacle Rock, the lighthouse sent its beam seaward. The craft had already passed the lookout towers miles out in the surf, where men were stationed to give advance warning if enemy steamers or airships appeared on the horizon. No alarms had gone up, not at the approach of an Iskandian freighter.

On the butte at the southern end of the harbor, gas lamps burned along the runway and all around the hangars of the airbase. For weeks, Cas had dreamed of seeing home again, but approaching it in a stolen vessel, with Captain Slaughter rubbing his hands and smiling as they grew nearer... that hadn't been part of the dream.

Her stomach twisted with anxiety as she eyed the controls beneath her fingers, contemplating a crash for the five hundredth time. She hadn't seen Tolemek since the captain relayed the story of their past. She had hoped he might do something and that she wouldn't feel compelled to crash the dirigible, but he hadn't sent so much as a note all afternoon. Of course, Slaughter hadn't left the navigation area for more than a minute, either. He was watching her carefully, his gun in his lap. It had been there since the truth serum had worn off, a moment she had sensed by the hard, cold stare he turned upon her. As if she were the one to have fed him the stuff. Maybe he thought she had.

She tried not to watch that gun. She would die if she crashed the ship, anyway, she told herself. What did it matter if he was thinking of shooting her? That would simply ensure the vessel's plummet into the ocean, unless these log-heads could dock a dirigible on their own. Granted, she hoped to survive a crash, inflicting most of the damage

to the captain's side of the ship. Surviving a bullet to the head was a trickier matter.

"Take us to Air Pier Two," Slaughter said. "It looks quiet there."

Though she had other things on her mind, it bothered Cas that he was familiar with the harbor.

She adjusted their course slightly. She had already lowered their altitude, and the roar of the waves was audible over the soft rumble of the propellers in the back. By design, their route would take them in past Pinnacle Rock and the lighthouse. It was visible to the left side of their viewing window. She didn't angle them too close to it, not yet.

An irritating bleep sounded on a panel to Slaughter's left. Technically, he was in the co-pilot's seat, even if he had yet to touch a control.

He frowned at the noise. "What's that?"

More bleeps followed the first.

"I'm not sure," Cas said. "What's that label say? Something to do with the hydrogen mix in the envelope, isn't it?"

The hydrogen was fine—she was running a routine test of the alarm systems and hoping Slaughter wouldn't recognize it as such. He was no stranger to airships, but maybe his unfamiliarity with an Iskandian model would confuse him. She only needed him distracted for a moment. As he frowned at the display, she nudged the control lever. Ever so slightly, the dirigible's course shifted. More of the lighthouse—and the massive rock it was perched upon—came into view.

"The levels look fine," the captain said.

"Can you stop that beeping?"

He pushed a couple of buttons. "I don't know. Aren't the controls over by you?"

"Not for the balloon gases. There's just a display up here. I think you have to adjust things in engineering." Cas urged him to go back there for a moment to do so, or at least to talk to the engineer.

Instead, Slaughter squinted suspiciously at her. He happened to glance through the viewport too. His eyes widened, and she sighed. They were lower than the lighthouse now, skimming along a couple dozen feet above the waves, but that rock was visible, thanks to the city lights behind it, so he would see that more of it occupied their horizon now.

"You're off course," the captain said. "The pier is over there."

Cas did her best to pretend she was trying to adjust the course without actually touching anything. "Strange. It's not responding."

The captain's pistol came up to her head so fast she barely had time to lift her hands from the controls. The cold metal muzzle pressed against her temple.

“Adjust the course, girl.”

Hands hovering over the controls, her rapid heartbeat echoing in her ears, Cas tried to make what might very well be the last decision of her life. If she took them to the dock, there was still a chance she could escape somehow once they were in town, report to her superiors, and warn them of the impending pirate attack. But if she crashed and killed Slaughter, the leader of this whole invasion scheme, this attack might never happen.

Cas set her jaw and dropped her hands to the controls. She made an abrupt turn, and Pinnacle Rock filled the air ahead.

Slaughter’s finger flexed on the trigger. “Wrong choice.”

Something cracked, and Cas ducked, nearly pitching out of her seat. She caught herself on the control panel. She touched her temple, even though her mind had caught up with her reflexes, and she realized that crack hadn’t been a pistol being fired. Nor had she been hurt. Slaughter, on the other hand, was crumpled on the floor beside his chair, grabbing his head and writhing.

Tolemek stood behind him, wearing a heavy cloak and carrying his bag slung over one shoulder. He lowered a truncheon clutched in one hand; he held a syringe with a big needle attached in the other.

“Yes,” he told the man at his feet. “It was.”

When Slaughter tried to get to his knees, Tolemek dropped the truncheon, grabbed him, and jabbed the needle into his neck. He thumbed the plunger down, and the red-brown liquid—it reminded Cas of blood—was pumped into the captain’s vein.

Cas could only stare, relieved by his intervention but also horrified by his method. “Will that kill him?” she asked.

“No.” Tolemek pulled out the needle and tossed the syringe onto the control panel. “Uh, Cas?” He pointed at Pinnacle Rock, which was now taking up their entire view. “Please don’t crash us.”

Though Cas wasn’t sure about all of the ramifications of Tolemek’s appearance—Did this mean he was on her side now? Did he control the engineer and the guards? Could he stop the invasion of his colleagues?—she grabbed the controls and pulled them hard to the side.

The dirigible had the maneuverability of a boulder. Afraid it would be too late, she watched with wide eyes as they flew closer and closer to that rock. Too late. She had been too late.

A jolt coursed through the dirigible.

“Balloon hitting?” Tolemek asked.

“Yes.”

“Will it, ah...?”

“Rip? They’re pretty sturdy, but this is a freighter, not a military-grade vessel.”

Another jolt went through the craft. Cas imagined a child's balloon being scraped along a brick wall until it popped. She also imagined the gas flowing out and being ignited by the flame of the lighthouse. No, it was too high above them for that. She hoped. The worst that would happen is that they would drop into the harbor, and probably not until they were close to the docks anyway. If they had to, they could swim. There weren't *usually* sharks in the harbor.

"You look concerned," Tolemek observed.

"At this very moment or just in general?" Cas asked, her humor bleak.

"At this moment. Your usual look is more determined."

She wasn't surprised when a bleeping started up on the alarm panel. This wasn't a systems test; not this time. The envelope had been breached. "That may be a small leak," she said, though she didn't feel very optimistic. "We're not that far from the waterfront at least. But, ah..." She tapped the altimeter at the same time as another alarm started bleeping. "We've dropped below the level of the air piers."

"If this were a Cofah airship, we would be able to land in the water safely, balloon notwithstanding. Am I correct in guessing that this gray metal box won't float?"

Cas decided it wasn't the time to go into aerodynamics and explain why the Cofah wooden-sailing-ship-in-the-sky designs were idiotic. "We'll be fine," she said, maneuvering the controls. "I'm going to take us to one of the sea docks. We'll land right on top."

"Those docks all have a lot of ships tied to them."

"I see that." Cas licked her lips. The docks weren't particularly wide either. They were meant for people to walk along, not for dirigibles to use as landing pads.

She guided them closer, aiming for the center of one of the wider ones. The alarms bleeping in her ears didn't help her concentration, but she had flown a lot faster before, while being shot at, so this wasn't *that* big of a challenge. She just had to accept that those merchant and fishing vessels on either side of the dock were going to get smothered if the balloon's frame had been damaged, and the envelope fully deflated.

As they drifted lower, Cas watched the street beyond the head of the dock. It was only an hour past sunset. Though the waterfront wasn't traditionally busy at night, there might be people about, witnesses for this. A couple of horse-drawn carriages and a steam wagon passed on the street. It was too dark and too far to make out details, so it was doubtlessly only in her imagination that the passengers gaped and pointed at her.

Cas turned off the propellers as they reached her target landing spot. In another moment, the bottom of the dirigible cabin settled on

the dock. The creaking and groaning of boards drifted through the hull. She hoped the pilings were solid.

"I'm surprised the engineer hasn't come up to check on us," she said, turning off the controls and searching for the mechanism that opened the side doors and extended the gangplank. "Or yell at me."

Tolemek pointed at the syringe. "Neither the engineer, nor the guards are awake. The fog machine has also been disabled."

"What does that mean?" Cas whispered. She was thinking of the attack on her city—would the other pirates call it off when they found the harbor untouched by those thick, obfuscating mists?

"That I can never go back."

Cas caught his reflection in the dark glass. His face was grimmer than a crematory, and his eyes were haunted, the eyes of a man wondering if he had made a mistake. Or condemned himself to death. She wished she could tell him he hadn't—in her eyes, he had certainly made the right choice, or at least the choice that helped her the most—but she wouldn't be able to protect him from her people. As soon as the law or the army identified him as a notorious pirate, he *would* be dead.

She blinked her eyes, turning to look at him. Seven gods, how was he going to get off the continent without being shot? And if he *did* get off, how would she ever see him again?

Tolemek handed her a parka, let his hand drop, then lifted it again. He touched the side of her head, a single soft stroke of her hair, then lowered his arm for a final time. "Let's get out of here before they wake up."

"Are you sure it wouldn't be wiser to... ah..." Cas waved vaguely at the inert captain. It wasn't in her stomach to shoot an unconscious man, but if Tolemek let them live, wouldn't he have to worry about them coming after him to seek revenge for the rest of his life?

"I'm sure it would." Tolemek walked out the door, and she barely heard his addition. "And I'm sure I can't."

. . . . .

The air smelled of damp and snow, and the cold breeze scraped at Tolemek's bare arms, another reminder to keep his hood over his head and his cloak wrapped around him. As if he needed reminders. He knew he couldn't let himself be recognized here. He needed to finish his quest, then find a way off the continent. Forever.

Following Cas, who was practically bouncing as she strode down the waterfront street, made those thoughts hard to come by. If it hadn't been for her, he didn't know if he would have ever bothered to defy Goroth. He had long suspected what the captain had admitted under the effects of the truth serum, so the information hadn't been a

shock. Realizing how much he cared that Cas knew the truth, that had been the shock. Goroth's words hadn't exactly exonerated him, but he hoped...

What? That she would forget his crimes and promise him her love?

Nice thought, but she was in love with her commander.

Cas stopped in front of a two-story building with lamps burning behind the shutters. "I'll be right back."

Port Authority, a sign by the door read. Tolemek didn't stop her from going in. He couldn't bring himself to kill Goroth, but if the man ended up arrested, was that any worse than what he had done to Tolemek all those years ago? Except, if the Iskandian port authorities found him, he would be arrested, then *killed*. Well, maybe not. He was a crafty sod; he might find a way to escape. Tolemek decided to hope he did. He snorted at himself, wondering if other pirates who turned on their allies felt as conflicted afterward.

The first snowflakes fell as Cas came back outside. Two men in dark uniforms and armed with rifles jogged out of the building after her, heading toward the dock with the dirigible cabin balanced on it, its balloon sagging against the frame as gas escaped.

"I need to report in." Cas took his arm and led him up a street. The butte with the air hangars on it loomed in the distance. "Let them know where I've been and warn everyone that there might still be pirates coming. Where, ah, do you have plans still?"

"Griffon Street."

She halted, her hand tightening on his arm.

"Just to question him," Tolemek said. "I don't know how I'll get back home to see my sister, even if I find what I seek, but my quest hasn't changed. Odd as it may sound to you, if that Cofah soldier spoke the truth, Zirkander is the most likely one here to know about soulblades." He expected an objection, if not an accusation. To her, this all might be part of some lie. She might believe killing Zirkander was what he had wanted all along.

"I'll go with you then. I can report in to him as easily as the night duty officer, and things will probably happen faster that way, anyway." Cas smiled, leading him up the street again.

Tolemek wished that smile were for him and not for the commander she would shortly see again. He strode through the snow at her side, keeping his hood low as they passed horsemen and vehicles. Fortunately, the impending snow was keeping many people off the streets. Unfortunately, that snow might make for poor enough weather that the armada of pirates might attack the city anyway, especially if they believed the fog was on its way.

"There's one thing about your quest that I don't understand," Cas said, as they walked between pools of light cast by the gas lamps on

the corners, the airbase butte looming larger with every block.

"Just one? I haven't spoken of the details to anyone."

"What can one of these swords do for her? Cure her of some malady? You've never said what's wrong with her."

No, he hadn't. He didn't speak of her to anyone. But what secrets did he truly have left from Cas now? For good or ill, she knew a lot about him. Maybe it was foolish, but he had come to trust her. He doubted she would relay this information to anyone who might use it against him. Besides, he might need her to help convince Zirkander to talk to him. Tolemek would be shocked if the infamous pilot greeted him with anything except guns.

"It's not a disease," Tolemek said. "If it were, I would have... I'm sure I could have done something for her. She's twelve years younger than me, and I always felt like her protector when she was little. We were close, especially after our brother died. But she can't take care of herself. Even now, as an adult. It's worse now. She's in the sanitarium back home. Father put her there when she started hurting herself. I didn't agree with that, abandoning her to strangers, to people who would rather drug her than deal with her, to put her in some dark room where she's kept restrained day and night, so she can't damage herself or others." For a moment, he didn't see the streets of the Iskandian capital, but the halls of that dreadful place. "I broke her out a few years ago." His lips twisted wryly, remembering the headline in the newspaper. Notorious Pirate Stages Raid on Home for the Mentally Disturbed. "I thought that maybe if she came with me, if she was in a better place, with someone who cared, maybe she'd improve."

Cas turned up a new street, one that sloped upward, with twin wrought-iron gates at the end. Tolemek doubted he had much time to finish his story.

"She wasn't any better. And my pirate life was no improvement for her. She wasn't safe with me, and I reluctantly returned her to the sanitarium. Temporarily, I told myself. Until I found the solution. I had, at least, found the reason for her problems."

Cas tilted her head toward him. "What?"

"Dragon blood. She was born with—*cursed* with—an affinity for magic. From my studies, I know that can manifest itself in a number of ways, and for her, it's made her... crazy. My only hope is to find her a soulblade to bond with, maybe one that holds the essence of a healer, someone who can help her and teach her to understand her abilities and come to terms with them." And not to be terrified of the world and herself. He sighed.

There was an alarmed—maybe even horrified—expression in her eyes when Cas looked at him, but all she said was, "That's, uhm, good of you to try to help her."

Magic was even less tolerated here than in his homeland, he gathered, but he needn't stay here once he found what he sought. He couldn't.

A boom sounded in the distance, back in the direction they had come from. The harbor. A bright orange blaze had erupted from the waterfront. No, from out on the docks. From the very dock where they had landed? Even though they had climbed up a hill, there were too many buildings in the way and too much distance to be sure, but he certainly didn't see the balloon, partially deflated or otherwise, of a dirigible down there. Not now.

"One of your booby traps?" Tolemek asked, a numbness creeping over his limbs. He had given Goroth and the other pirates a sizable dose of that sedative. Chances were they were still on the deck in that cabin, or they had been. He closed his eyes. He hadn't meant to kill them.

"No. That shouldn't have happened." Cas sounded genuinely surprised.

"The hydrogen in the envelope must have ignited."

"A rip in the balloon shouldn't have caused anything more than a leak. The cabin was in good shape when we landed. There was nothing burning, no reason the gas should have been touched with fire."

Tolemek believed her. Crafty as she was, he didn't know how she could have set something like that up from the navigation area anyway. "Your port authorities then."

"That's hard to imagine. I could see them blowing up a pirate ship if it was out there far enough that it wouldn't damage anything else, but blowing up one of our own freighters just because it had some unconscious pirates on it? And when it was surrounded by privately owned vessels? The king would take more than their jobs over something like that."

"Hm."

"We'll have to wait and solve the mystery later," Cas said. "I have to report in."

Tolemek nodded, and they headed up the street again.

It turned out the army installation wasn't on top of the butte—it simply had a view of it from a hill overlooking the city and the harbor. It covered dozens of city blocks with a wall and razor wire marking the perimeter. The gates Tolemek had seen in the distance were guarded.

Cas stepped into an alley a couple of blocks from the entrance, waving for him to follow. "*I* can walk up to the guards and get in without... well, there will be questions asked, but they wouldn't be, so, who's your friend. Or so, which cell block shall we stick your

pirate prisoner in."

The idea of him as the prisoner amused him, given that he was armed with weapons and the formulas and gadgets in his bag, while she wore little more than the parka he had given her. Still clad in those horrible cloth shoes, she didn't even have decent footwear.

"I anticipated this. You go ahead without me." Tolemek drew one of his leather spheres out of his bag, knowing she would recognize it. "I'll find my own way in."

Cas gazed up at him. Trying to read his face? To elicit a promise that he wouldn't hurt anyone? He thought about saying that he trusted her not to tell the gate guards which alley he was in and how many men they would need to subdue him, but decided it didn't need to be said at this point.

"Be careful," Cas whispered, then stood on tiptoes, resting her hands on his shoulder.

He wasn't expecting it, so he almost dropped his sphere when she kissed him. What a mess that would have made. Pirate and lieutenant believed to be dead found snoring and entwined in back alley, lips pressed together. Except they weren't entwined yet. Tolemek hurried to pocket the sphere so he could bend down, wrap his arms around her, and return the kiss. This would make it all the harder to leave, but he didn't care. In choosing her over Goroth, something had changed for her, and she was letting him know. With a soft, lingering kiss full of longing and... regret. Or maybe those were his own feelings. Still, when she drew back and he cupped the side of her face, his thumb found moisture on her cheek.

"You be careful too," he whispered. "I know you don't want to believe it, but if that sorceress *is* controlling your commander, he may not be the man you're expecting."

Cas snorted and walked out of the alley.

He wasn't sure why he had added that. Because he hoped it was true? Because he wanted Cas to have faith in him instead of Zirkander? Idiot. He should have said, thank you for the sublime kiss and let's do it again sometime.

Chapter 13

Cas turned onto Griffon Street, her stride quick. The snow was falling more heavily, and the cold pavement pressed through the bottoms of her thin shoes. She had only the memory of the heat of Tolemek's kiss to keep her warm, something she couldn't, alas, spend as much time thinking about as she would have liked. The soldiers at the gate had recognized her—one of the perks of being a part of Wolf Squadron—and given her hearty thumps on the back and ushered her straight into the courtyard. It had been clear in their eyes that they wanted her story—especially since she still wore the ridiculous-for-this-climate prison smock beneath her borrowed parka—but a distant alarm had gone off, and they had all known stories would have to wait. Cas had to report immediately. She recognized the bong-bong-bongs and knew the alarm originated at one or more of the ocean watch towers beyond the harbor and were being relayed into the city. It wasn't the ear-splitting siren screech that would announce an all-out attack was imminent, but it did mean unfriendlies had been spotted in the sky, and it was strongly suggested that some fliers be sent out to check on them. *That* meant the colonel might be racing out his door right now.

Cas turned her walk into a run, watching the sidewalks of the officers' quarters ahead. There were larger houses on the left side of the street, for those who had families, but she looked right, toward a little cottage past a fountain featuring a dragon, its wings spread, ready to head into battle. The home's front window was shuttered, but a lantern glowed behind the slats. Good. Maybe he hadn't left yet. If she caught him, she might be able to go along in addition to briefing him. By the gods, she missed her work—and her team. And she would love to help Wolf Squadron finish off that pirate outpost. Tolemek could ask his questions about swords later.

She jogged up the sidewalk, slipping on the icy cement, its cracks thickened with snow. She missed her uniform and her boots too. She made it to the door without decorating her backside with snow and banged out a knock as hard and fast as the automatic gunfire on a flier.

“Colonel?” she called when seconds dragged by without a response. He usually answered a door knock with a “Yeah?” no matter what he was doing or who was calling. He could have left and forgotten to cut out the lamp.

But she heard footsteps, and a broad smile stretched her lips. Until the door opened.

A woman stood there. The wheels in Cas’s wagon stuttered to a stop. It wasn’t *unheard* of for the colonel to keep female company—though he didn’t usually bring women back to the fort—but this woman appeared more regal than he usually went for. Oh, she was a beauty, with striking pale blue eyes and rich thick black hair held back from her face with combs, but she looked like someone who belonged in an upscale parlor rather than the dingy taverns Zirkander favored.

Tolemek’s warning, the one Cas had dismissed with nothing more than a derisive snort, rushed to the forefront of her mind. This was not some sorceress who was—she refused to use the world controlling—*influencing* the colonel, was she? Surely sorceresses were old and gray with bent backs and canes. Or staffs. Or brooms. No, that was witches. Seven gods, this was superstitious nonsense. She was gaping at some poor woman in stockings who was being dusted with snowflakes blowing through the doorway. Did Cas even have the right house?

“Uh.” She glanced past the woman’s shoulder—she was taller than Cas, but who wasn’t?—toward the combination kitchen, dining, living room. Yes, those were the colonel’s pictures on the wall, a mix of fliers that had been his over the years and of pilots he had served with, along with a portrait of his world-exploring father standing arm-in-arm with his mother. That was *definitely* his tacky yellow-and-green plaid couch, a hand-me-down he had supposedly received from a now-deceased commanding officer and that he refused to part with—most of the pilots in the squadron were convinced he secretly adored it, or perhaps adored the appalled looks people had when they saw it. “Is, uhm, Colonel Zirkander here?”

The woman had been silently studying Cas even as she was studying the woman—and the couch—and said, “He’s at a special meeting at the airbase. About you, I believe.”

That made Cas’s attention lurch back to the woman with the speed of a bullet. “What?” How could this woman possibly know who she was?

Because she was a sorceress and omnipotent...

Cas shook her head, suddenly wishing Tolemek were at her back with his bag full of concoctions.

“Lieutenant Ahn, isn’t it?” The woman’s voice was pleasant enough, melodious even, if oddly accented. Either way, it didn’t make Cas feel

any less uneasy. “He was stomping around, muttering and cursing all afternoon, waiting for a response from his commanders. His Captain Haksor thought he recognized you on a pirate outpost, and he’s been trying to get permission to take his men back out. I believe this meeting might be about attempting to recruit people willing to go out whether permission has been granted or not. He was too agitated to unpack the details for me before taking off again.” She smiled—fondly?

Cas pushed her hand through her hair. “I had wondered if anyone saw... I’m sorry, who are you exactly?” She hadn’t been gone *that* long, and it seemed strange that the colonel had gone from not being involved with any women—the squadron gossip chain was quite up-to-date and accurate when it came to the personal affairs of its officers—to having one live with him in a few short weeks. Or... how long had he been back from his post in the mountains anyway?

“Sardelle.” The woman brushed snowflakes out of her hair, stepped aside, and gestured toward the living area. “Would you like to come in? You seem agitated yourself.”

“That’s not a strong enough word. But, no. I have to find him. If he’s—” Cas’s mouth tumbled open. What if the colonel, thinking he needed to fly off to look for her, led the squadron out this very night and wasn’t here for the pirate attack? The bong-bong-bongs drifting up from the harbor hadn’t elevated to a more demanding alarm, but they hadn’t gone away, either. “I haven’t reported in anywhere yet. I have to find him. Or General Ort.”

She backed up a step, debating between a polite goodbye and simply racing down the street to the headquarters building, but bumped into someone.

“*I’d* like to come in,” Tolemek said. His expression was impossible to read, but his eyes had that determination he had accused her of. And maybe something of a lupine fierceness as well.

“Uhm, Sardelle,” Cas said, feeling ridiculous doing introductions when she had barely met the woman herself. “This is Tolemek, the pirate who helped me escape.”

“Pirate?” Sardelle’s brows rose in mild curiosity, not the alarm one might expect from the announcement.

“He’s retired now,” Cas said, “though he hasn’t turned in his garish wardrobe yet.” She patted Tolemek’s chest—the hide vest and trousers weren’t so bad, since they displayed his physical attributes nicely, but the shark-tooth necklace and barbed-metal wrist bracers had to go.

Tolemek was keeping his eyes on the woman—maybe he was thinking of sorceresses too?—but he murmured, “Big talk from someone wearing a potato sack,” and swatted her on the butt.

At first, the familiarity surprised her, but she *had* kissed him, not

twenty minutes ago. He must have considered that an invitation to engage in other sorts of intimate exchanges. After a brief consideration, Cas decided she liked that and gave him a little grin. Of course, she would like it more after she reported in, and the world returned to normal.

"I have to go," she said. "Are you sure you want to stay here? Or that her invitation applies to you?"

Sardelle's face was hard to read. She wasn't armed, wearing only an attractive blue dress with a braided cord for a belt—no place to tuck knives or guns there—but she didn't appear alarmed by Tolemek's pirate garb—or the pistols holstered at his waist. Her arm was still out, extended toward the living area, and she tilted her head in that direction now too.

"Come in, Mister Tolemek. I don't imagine it's safe for you on the streets of this installation."

No, even if he weren't wearing such dubious clothing, with that Cofah bronze skin, he was clearly not an Iskandian soldier.

"Be careful," Cas whispered after him when he started inside.

He looked over his shoulder and nodded gravely to her. Cas had no choice but to leave him, but as the door shut and she ran back down the street, she wondered if she was making a mistake.

. . . . .

Tolemek's senses tingled. He was uneasy, yes, but there was more to it than that. It was almost as if he could feel... magic. Ridiculous since, aside from his sister, he had never been around anyone with otherworldly power, at least not to his knowledge, and his sister didn't make his nerves jangle like this. When the front door thumped shut, he almost jumped over the awful couch, so he could spin around, putting it between himself and the woman. The sorcereress. His hunches might not be scientific, but he trusted them.

The woman—Sardelle, wasn't it?—leaned against the wall. She wasn't armed, and she wasn't leering at him with a threat on her lips, but he nonetheless felt like he had walked into the dragon's lair unarmed.

"What brings you to Ridge's doorstep, Cofah pirate?" Sardelle asked, her eyes narrowed. Her tone might not be threatening, but it wasn't friendly, either.

Ridge—that was Zirkander's first name, right? Ridgewalker? Something like that.

"Originally, I'd thought to kill him." It might not have been the brightest thing he could have said, but he wasn't going to admit that he was here looking for her—or her sword. "He ruined my career in the army. I was in command of an infantry company defending an

airship. He and his pilots destroyed it and almost everyone on it."

"Through chicanery or in honorable combat?" she asked, though the way she crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a frank stare suggested she knew the answer. Odd, he hadn't expected her to defend Zirkander. If she was truly controlling him for some ulterior motive, wouldn't she see him as little more than a pawn?

"I'm not sure I'd call your dragon fliers all that honorable when they zero in on airships," Tolemek said.

"Airships that have a long history of dropping bombs on our people."

"*Our?*"

It was a simple question, but she didn't respond right away. "Do I not look Iskandian?"

"It's not what you *look* like that's the issue. You feel..." Tolemek stopped himself before he could reveal information he should keep to himself. She would be warier if she knew he knew what she was. Better to have her think he was just a big dumb pirate.

"Interesting," she said and studied him from head to toe.

Too late. He had hinted at too much. Was she even now reading his thoughts? The sorcerers of old had been able to do that, but would some modern version be as strong? The histories said all of the major lines had been wiped out and that there were none left with substantial power, or even the faculty to teach. Unless one could find a soulblade.

But if she wasn't that strong, how had she defeated a jungle shaman? Those people, on their isolated and distant continent, had survived the purge of three centuries past, and were rumored to have power that nearly matched that of the old Iskandian sorcerers.

"Ridge was your original reason for coming, you say," Sardelle said. "What is your *current* reason for being here?"

Tolemek faced a wood stove in the corner of the room, as if he were deep in thought, though he only wanted his back to hide the fact that he was reaching into his bag. "Mostly... Cas. Lieutenant Ahn." He bypassed one of his leather spheres—that would affect him as well as her, not to mention starting a fight if it didn't work—and grasped a vial of his truth serum. He had no idea how he might convince her to drink it—did Iskandian sorceresses enjoy inviting Cofah pirates for wine?—but it seemed a far more viable way to get the answers he wanted than holding a knife to her throat. "We escaped from a Cofah prison together. I've come to care about her. I wanted to make sure she made it home safely."

"A feat that could have been accomplished by leaving her at the dock," Sardelle said. "You risked a lot to walk her to her door. And not even her door, at that. I believe she lives in the barracks."

Tolemek distracted himself by wondering if her room was still there or if her people, believing her dead, would have sent her things back to her family. It would be a shame if she had to keep wearing that canvas smock around.

Focus.

"I did risk a lot," he agreed, facing the woman again. She hadn't moved from the wall. "I heard an interesting story on the way back here, and I wished to check on the details." He gestured toward the little kitchen. "Perhaps we could discuss it over a glass of wine."

"And poison?" Sardelle arched a single brow.

Tolemek froze. Apparently he hadn't been as subtle as he had thought. This whole situation had him flustered. He had planned to stalk her down and speak with her. Why hadn't he prepared himself better?

Because it was Zirkander he had expected to run into here, not his sorceress.

"Poison?" he said, mouth dry. "No. If I meant to kill you, I would shoot you."

"You could try." Those pale blue eyes had taken on the temperature of ice.

Yes, he had found his sorceress. And what was he going to do about it? He supposed he could try to force the truth serum down her throat. But she looked confident about responding to a physical threat. Maybe she would simply answer his questions. No, she probably wouldn't, not when magic was so feared on this continent. It was hard to believe she was here, on an Iskandian military base.

Oh.

"They don't know you're here, do they?" Tolemek asked. "Or maybe they've seen you, but they don't know what you are."

Some of the confidence faded from the woman's face. Bull's-eye. She lifted her chin. "Somehow I doubt you, pirate, are going to be the one to tell them anything. Your word can't be any more trusted here than mine."

"How about I just tell *him*?" Tolemek waved toward the inside of the cottage to suggest Zirkander. "Or have Cas do it. He has no reason to trust me, but he'll trust her."

Sardelle's eyebrow twitched upward. "Ridge knows."

Tolemek rocked back on his heels. He knew some sorceress was controlling him? And he wasn't moving the world to try and stop that? He was just accepting the fact and letting her stay in his house too?

She's not controlling him, genius. She's sleeping with him.

Already on his heels, Tolemek stumbled backward, grabbing the wall for support when the voice sounded in his head. Yes, that had

been *in* his head. And, dearest gods and demons, it hadn't even been her, had it?

"Who are—who was that?" he rasped, half to Sardelle and half to the empty room.

Sardelle didn't respond as he had expected. She dropped her face into her hand, shook her head, and groaned something that sounded like, "Jaxi."

Sardelle is too polite to root around in your thoughts. I'm not. Get to the point here and leave her alone. Trouble's coming, thanks to you. A lot of it.

Tolemek sensed the impatience of the other... voice, but he couldn't help but blurt, "Who are you?"

A sigh whispered through his thoughts. *If you must respond to me—and let me stress how optional that is—you can think the words. No need to look like an idiot for talking to yourself.*

By now Sardelle had lifted her head, but she was gazing out the window at something. At least that was the impression she gave; the shutters were still closed.

Tolemek silently repeated, *Who are you?*

Jaxi.

Jaxi?

I'm not giving you any more of my name. Not that you'd know what to do with it.

"We need to leave," Sardelle said, a hint of agitation—or maybe irritation—in her voice for the first time. "When you knocked out the guards, you left the way open for other unsavory persons to sneak onto the base."

She gave him a cool stare, but not a long one. She was busy striding into the little bedroom and, judging by the slamming of drawers and cabinets, packing. Tolemek turned out the lamp near the window and peeked through the gap between the shutters. The now-heavy snow made it tough to see farther than the street. If there were people out there, they weren't within sight yet. His heart clenched at the thought of Cas taking her flier up in this weather.

Huh. You do care about the girl.

Tolemek jumped, blurting, "Blind hedgehogs and bat spit."

"Does that pass for a curse in Cofahre?" Sardelle strode out of the bedroom carrying a wooden box tucked under her arm. She had also donned a thick cloak, fur-lined boots, and a weapons belt with a sword hanging in a decorative scabbard.

"In the presence of a lady, yes." Tolemek, realizing he had been clutching at his heart, lowered his hand.

Ladies, corrected the voice in his head.

It was only then, when he saw the sword on Sardelle's hip, that he realized who must be talking to him. He wasn't sure whether to be

honored or terrified.

Both.

"Back door," Sardelle said. "Nobody's watching it yet."

"You're inviting me to come with you?" Tolemek asked.

She gave him a long look over her shoulder. "I'm inviting you to let me keep an eye on you. Regardless, you're not staying here to paw over Ridge's belongings. Or mine."

Also, she booby-trapped the house. There was a smile in the voice, as if the sword *wanted* him to stay here and trigger them.

Tolemek eased around the dining table and picked his way toward the back door, walking gingerly as he wondered what magical booby traps might look like.

A tea kettle sitting on the cast-iron stove blatted a puff of steam. He kept himself from jumping again, though he was fairly certain there wasn't a fire stoked under the burners.

"I think your sword is teasing me," he whispered, stepping past Sardelle, who had paused to hold open the door for him. A half inch of fresh powder coated the neatly manicured lawn behind the cottage.

"Consider yourself lucky." Sardelle shut the door and locked it—without using a key. She simply waved her hand. "For a moment, I thought she was going to stop your heart, leaving me with the problem of explaining a mysteriously dead pirate on the living room rug."

Tolemek opened his mouth, but nothing came out. What was one supposed to say to that?

"I'm not quite caught up on who you are yet," Sardelle said, walking through the snow behind the cottage and slipping over to the backyard of the next house instead of using the pathway, "but she assured me Ridge would be pleased to have your head stuffed and mounted on his wall." She glanced at his face, or maybe his long ropes of hair. "I'd find that disturbing decor myself."

"You don't know who I am, but... your sword does?" Tolemek reminded himself that he had wanted this meeting. It just wasn't going at all how he had imagined.

"She doesn't need to sleep, so she has a lot more time on her hands to read the tabloids."

Please, I only deign to read scholarly periodicals and peer-reviewed journals.

They reached the last house on the block, and Sardelle angled toward an oak that had probably been there since the city was founded. Its thick, bare branches offered some protection from the snow, though the wind was picking up, swirling the flakes sideways as well as down.

"Do you hear what she says when she's talking in my head?"

Tolemek asked.

Sardelle stopped behind the trunk and looked back toward Zirkander's house. "I make it a point to stay out of other people's conversations."

That hadn't been a no, he noted.

"They just broke the lock on the front door," Sardelle said. "Eight of them. Most went inside to search for whatever it is you people are searching for." She looked at him. An invitation to share?

"You're sure they're *my* people?"

"They share your suspect dress code."

Tolemek put a hand on the trunk of the tree and squinted into the snow, wishing he could see what she saw. Eight people. That was more than they'd had on the freighter. So, whoever was out there, it wasn't Goroth. But weren't all the other pirates supposed to be in the air, waiting to attack? Someone wasn't going along with the script.

A yelp of pain drifted across the yards, someone crying out from the house.

"Booby trap?" Tolemek asked.

"Yes. I'm not letting pirates, or anyone else, poke through my laboratory."

"Laboratory?" He eyed the wooden box under her arm, intrigued.

Sardelle didn't respond. She was staring intently at the house—or through the walls maybe.

A glint of orange appeared through the snow, and something sailed out of the night to land on the roof.

"Burning fuse," Tolemek said.

"I see it."

He thought she might snuff it out with her mind, or whatever sorcerers did, but the burning fuse turned to a blast of white and yellow light, with an accompanying boom. The snow muffled the noise somewhat, but dogs started barking somewhere down the street. Smoke shrouded the building.

Tolemek looked to the fort's big stone wall, the gray mass rising two blocks away. He had seen soldiers marching up there. It wouldn't be a secret that the base had been breached for much longer. Shouts rose in the distance, not from the nearby wall but from the direction of the front gate. The soldiers he had left sleeping must have awakened. He grimaced. When he had been coming up with a way to get in, he hadn't been worrying much about getting out. Of course, he hadn't been planning on setting off explosives either.

He checked on the house, expecting the smoke to clear to reveal little more than rubble, but it remained intact, not so much as a roof shingle torn free.

"It seems your ordnance team is ineffective," Sardelle said, her eyes

gleaming.

"It's not *my* team."

"They've decided not to try again. They're heading toward the wall in the corner of the fort. I think they're planning to blow themselves a new exit gate." She glanced toward the top of the wall, much as Tolemek had done. "I intend to stop them."

"I'll help." Tolemek strode through the snow beside her. He doubted she needed his help, but if he could turn her into an ally, maybe she would help him with his quest, or at least point him in the right direction.

The flat look Sardelle gave him didn't suggest his help or company was appreciated, but he matched her pace anyway. She had invited him along, after all.

As they crossed the street near the wall, he spotted fewer soldiers than he would have expected running in step toward Zirkander's house. The bong-bong-bong of that alarm was still going off, so maybe men were being siphoned toward the harbor. Oddly, none of them noticed Tolemek and Sardelle crossing the street.

Tolemek spotted dark figures ahead, angling toward the corner she had mentioned. Hand delving into his sack, he jogged into the lead. He could deal with the men the same way he had with the guards, then tie them up afterward. Besides, he wanted to see who these people were, preferably before a sorceress obliterated them.

The bongs halted as he jogged toward them, trying to soften his steps so they wouldn't hear him coming. They were doing a lot of nervous pointing and gesturing. Already he had them pegged for lackeys. Goroth wouldn't have been stupid enough to hurl explosives and let everyone know he was in the compound. But *whose* lackeys?

When he was within fifteen meters, Tolemek thumbed the activator on his leather ball and chucked it into their midst. They had reached the wall, and two were crouching in the snow, setting something against its base. One noticed the ball hit the ground and jumped back, yanking a pistol free.

"Go ahead," Tolemek whispered. "Shoot it."

That would simply free the air-borne sedative more quickly.

The man didn't shoot the ball though. He kicked snow over it, tapped a comrade on the shoulder, and peered all around them. There was no camouflage to hide Tolemek except for the falling snow, but he had his next weapon ready. He had withdrawn and unfolded a collapsible blow gun, already loaded with special darts. He fired at the same time as the man—the pirate, yes, he wore the unlikely collection of stolen garments that so many of the Roaming Curse favored—spotted him.

Tolemek dropped, rolling to the side, expecting a shot. It never

came. The man had dropped his gun to claw at his face. From his belly, Tolemek shot two more projectiles, glad the cold hadn't yet frozen his black cobwebs, as he called them. These darts were similar to the one he had fired at the guard back when he and Cas had been escaping that fortress. They expanded upon impact and stuck to the flesh like instant glue. A shot to the eyes or mouth was particularly effective.

After three shots, he was out, but by then, the sedating smoke from the leather ball had permeated the area. Though Tolemek couldn't see it from his spot on the snow, he saw the effects. Soon all eight men collapsed.

Rising to a crouch, he looked back to check on Sardelle. To see if she might be impressed, or at least pleased that he had dealt with these people so she hadn't had to incinerate them or turn them into frogs, or whatever her style was. She was only a few feet behind him, her gaze toward the wall, or maybe the harbor beyond it.

Before he could say a word, an ear-splitting wail started up. It seemed to come from the same amplifiers that had brought the bongs. It also seemed to say that whatever had been going on before was nothing compared to what was coming now.

"Attack," Tolemek whispered. What else could that alarm be meant to signal?

The aerosol from his ball should have dissipated, so he ran forward to the fallen pirates. He turned them over on their backs, checking faces. Two were covered with his black cobwebs, rendering the features indistinguishable, but a couple of the men seemed familiar, pirates he had seen around the outpost on occasion. He stared in surprise at the fourth man, recognizing him instantly. It was the Cofah corporal who had been seeking asylum.

"Guess you weren't on the *Burning Dragon* when it blew up," Tolemek muttered. "Was your captain, I wonder?" If Stone Heart had survived that attack but lost his ship... he would have a lot of new reasons to loathe Zirkander and the Iskandians.

Do you always interrogate unconscious men?

This time, Tolemek didn't jump at the voice in his head, but he doubted he would ever find it anything but jarring. *No.*

Good, because I can't imagine that with your skills you'd find it particularly effective.

"Your sword has gone from teasing me to insulting me," Tolemek said when Sardelle approached, carrying lengths of twine that he was fairly certain hadn't been among the items she took from the house. Unless they had come out of that box. He doubted it.

"That's how she bonds with a person." Sardelle tossed him four of the ropes, then knelt to tie the first of the downed men.

"Does she insult *you*?"

"Hourly."

Sardelle moved onto her second pirate, and Tolemek hurried to catch up. That siren wailing couldn't mean anything good. He wondered if Cas had found her squadron yet, and if she was even now preparing to go up into the gusting wind and heavy snow. She had sneered at the snail-like attributes of the dirigibles and airships, but being in one of those little fliers when nature was throwing a fit did not seem like a life-sustaining activity.

"She's not what I imagined in a soulblade," Tolemek said to distract himself from worrying. It wasn't as if he could do anything to help Cas, except maybe find out where Stone Heart was and what he was up to.

Sardelle paused in tying her third man. "You know what a soulblade is? That's not common anymore. Nor is talking openly about them." Her lips thinned and she glanced up at the wall. "Nor anything related to magic."

It occurred to him that she might be as much of an intruder here as he was. Well, no. She must be Zirkander's guest, but doubtlessly she was down on the books as girlfriend, not sorceress. So what would happen if the army found out?

By this point, he almost expected a threat from Jaxi, but the sword either wasn't paying attention to his thoughts or was chilled to silence at the idea of Sardelle being caught. Probably the former. From what little he had seen, he doubted much could chill the entity to silence.

"I've been researching them." Tolemek wondered if this might be his opportunity to broach the subject with her, to ask if she might know a way to help his sister.

But Sardelle was frowning down at one of the pirates—the former Cofah soldier. She couldn't have seen him and remember who he was, could she?

"He came to our outpost," Tolemek said, "blabbing about a battle in the mountains and a mine that Zirkander was guarding."

She met his eyes, her own blue ones sharp. "And of a strange woman with a glowing sword?"

"That might have been mentioned."

"I see." She looked like she might wish to cut the corporal's throat instead of merely tying him and leaning him against the wall for the soldiers to find, but she kept herself to using the twine. Roughly.

Then again, maybe it wasn't the time to ask for favors.

"They went this way," came a call from Griffon Street. The soldier raised his voice, "You men on the wall see anything?"

"No," someone responded from above, "but we're looking at..."

Tree branches stood in the way, and Tolemek couldn't see where

the soldier might be pointed, but guessed the harbor. With the snow, he doubted any ships would be visible yet, but they had to know something was out there.

"Looks like the investigative team is approaching," Tolemek said, glad they had finished tying the unconscious men. "I'm presuming we don't want to be found here?"

"No." Sardelle pulled a rope out from under her cloak—there was definitely no way she had come out of the house with that. "Loop this around that dragon head up there, please. Climb up, then help me up. I'll keep the men on the wall distracted."

"As you wish."

Wondering when he had gone from thinking to interrogate the sorceress to taking orders from her, Tolemek made a loop of the end of the rope and tried for the indicated target, one of several dragon-head downspouts. It took him a few tosses, but he eventually lassoed one of the protrusions. He shimmied the fifteen feet up to the top, his vials clinking softly in his bag, then turned to help Sardelle.

"Catch," she whispered, and tossed the wooden box to him.

It wasn't heavy, and he caught it easily. His hands, wanting for mittens in the cold, were strangely warmed by the wood's touch. Something else magical? He was tempted to peek within, but Sardelle was nearly to the top. He helped her onto the walkway.

"Down the other side?" he asked, pointing to the street below.

She shook her head mutely, looking toward the harbor, not the street. "You know anything about that?"

When Tolemek turned, following her gaze, it was all he could do to keep from cursing. The snow had let up momentarily, and he could make out a layer of fog rising up from the harbor and curling through the streets of the city.

"No," he whispered. "I disabled the machine. Anyway, it was inside the freighter. The freighter that blew up." This couldn't be his doing. It couldn't.

Sardelle gave him a long, penetrating stare.

Tolemek dropped his face into his palm. Goroth might be dead or imprisoned, but his vision was going to come to pass. The fog and the snow were going to bury the city, and the armada was going to do its best to devastate it.

He peered through his fingers toward the butte, where the number of lights had doubled. Was Cas already there? Preparing her flier to go out in that mess? He groaned, wishing he could tell her to come back to him instead.

"Come on," Sardelle said, pointing to the street. "We need to get up there before they take off. I have something that will help them." Her voice lowered, and the wind almost kept him from hearing her next

words. “If they’ll accept it.”

Chapter 14

Cas bounced from foot to foot, almost wishing she had run up the path to the top of the butte instead of taking the aerial tram. She knew from previous experience with bets and stopwatches that the tram was faster, but it didn't *feel* faster. The weather was getting worse by the minute, and she feared the squadron, wanting to deal with the threat before the storm began in earnest, would take off without her. It was only at General Ort's insistence that she had taken the time to sprint to the barracks and change into her flight uniform and grab her goggles, scarf, and cap. Granted the sturdy boots and fur-lined jacket were more appropriate to the winter weather, but if she missed catching up with the colonel and the others, and if they found trouble out there—trouble she might have advised them on—she would pummel the nearest target with bullets, whether it was something living or not.

"You're lucky you're heading up here at all, ma'am," the sergeant operating the tram said, the wind nearly stealing his words. It was gusting hard from the north, and the cabin, supported only by the cables above, rocked under the weather's influence. Taking off would be extremely challenging. He waved at her shifting feet. "I'm about to close the tram down for the night. Inclement conditions."

"Better keep it running. Pirates are coming to attack the city." Even as she spoke the bong-bong-bong alarm bell escalated to an undulating siren call.

The sergeant asked something, but Cas burst out of the tram cabin as soon as they reached the butte. She sprinted for the hangar, scarcely paying attention to the icy ground beneath her feet. She threw open the door and nearly crashed into someone's back. Two men were standing there, discussing something while controlled chaos —pilots and the ground crew racing to and fro, preparing the fliers—went on in the hangar in front of them. The man on the right was the only person who could wrinkle a leather jacket and scarf—and the rest of his uniform—on a consistent basis, so she knew him from behind: Captain Crash Haksor. The man on the left had his cap tilted at a familiar rakish angle.

“Lieutenant Ahn reporting for duty, sir,” she said around a lump in her throat.

Cas had barely gotten her hand up for a salute before the two men spun toward her and she found herself engulfed in a hug. She wasn’t even sure who it was, as she found her feet lifted from the ground and her face buried in the shoulder of a jacket, inhaling the scent of worn leather. Someone thumped her on the back, which was followed by the sound of boots pounding the cement floor, and a lot more thumps. And more hugs. And more time spent with her feet in the air. It was overwhelming, and as much as she appreciated the enthusiasm, she had to fight the urge not to wriggle free and escape for a gasp of fresh air. She reminded herself that they had all thought she was dead. The other women, Captain Blazer and Lieutenant Solk, were the only ones who didn’t try to pick her up, though they did clap her on the shoulder. Blazer’s usually-irritating head pat was a welcome expression of affection this time, due to its sedateness.

Cas was about to say something to the officers—her friends—gathered around when a straggler ran up, grease smearing his hair and snow dusting his shoulders. Lieutenant Pimples Averstash had been the youngest member of Wolf Squadron until she signed on, and he surprised her by pushing everyone aside to give her a fierce hug and a big kiss on the cheek. It actually might not have been on the cheek if she hadn’t turned her head in time. That was surprising—they’d always been friends, but she hadn’t known he had cared *that* much—and she couldn’t find words for a moment.

“Cas, I lo—missed you,” he blurted.

She tried not to look like the proverbial antelope in the hunter’s sights as she stared at him, but doubted she managed.

“Lieutenant Averstash,” came the colonel’s drawl from the side. “I know you’re happy to see Ahn, but do you really think it’s appropriate to kiss your fellow officers?”

Averstash released Cas’s arms and skittered back, amidst stares, smirks, and chortles from the rest of the onlookers. Cas might have thanked Zirkander, but his brown eyes were glittering with amusement, and he wasn’t bothering to hide his grin. She glowered at him. His grin broadened.

“Of course it’s appropriate, sir,” Averstash said, rubbing the back of his neck—it was flushed almost as red as his cheeks. “I’d kiss you, too, if not for the beard shadow. It looks itchy.”

“I’ll be sure not to shave anytime soon then.”

“Donkey ass,” Lieutenant Solk muttered to Averstash and elbowed him in the ribs.

“Sir?” one of the ground crew asked, jogging up to Zirkander’s side. “Your flier is ready. Shall we get one ready for the L.T. too?” He

nodded at Cas.

"Hells, yes," she said, relieved there was something in the hangar for her to fly. With poor W-48 at the bottom of the ocean, she had no right to a craft, but she had been praying Zirkander would deem her valuable enough to give her another without a long wait. "I didn't run across the city just to see these toad-kissers off."

"You heard the lieutenant, Grashon. Wipe the dust off W-5."

"Yes, sir."

"The rest of you cloud-hoppers, mount up," Zirkander called, his voice ringing in the hangar. "It's time to get these fliers in the air before the mosquitoes get here."

Cries of, "Yes, sir!" answered him, and men and women charged for their cockpits.

The colonel drew Cas aside, gave her a quick one-armed hug, and said, "It's fantastic to see you here alive. I didn't know if Crash had been delusional when he said he saw you on that pirate outpost. I want the whole story when there's more time, but I need as much intel as you can cram into two minutes now. This is a retaliatory attack from the pirates, we're guessing?"

"Yes, sir. They're bringing their whole armada."

"*Armada?*"

"All of the ships that were there for your attack and their big station too. You know that fog?" Cas searched his eyes, wondering how he had found the outpost in the first place, when the pirates' mobile location and their shroud of fog had kept the authorities from finding it for so long.

Zirkander nodded once, an odd hint of tension, or maybe wariness, entering his eyes at the question.

"The advance party, the ship they had me on, brought the machine for making it, and was planning to blanket the harbor so we'd have a hard time seeing them to fight and protect the city."

"Huh. That'll be as much of a hindrance for them as it is for us."

"I think their original plan was to have the fog going before the ships got here, so the soldiers in the watchtowers wouldn't see them coming, and we'd be caught completely unaware. But a pirate helped me escape and knock out the captain who thought everything up. He said he disabled the fog machine too."

The colonel's eyes narrowed. He couldn't possibly know who this pirate was who had helped her escape simply on that information, could he? Others could disable a machine... even if only by hurling it against a bulkhead a few times. She wanted to blurt out everything and try to explain how Tolemek had helped her and how he should be... if not exonerated at least not shot on sight. But there was no time. And if Tolemek stayed out of trouble, he might be able to finish

his quest and escape before the army learned he was here anyway. So long as she didn't blab about it.

A rumble and a clank sounded as the big hangar doors were pushed open. Snow gusted inside, skidding past the wheels of the first flier, already in the queue, ready to roll out. Wind railed at the metal hangar roof, too, making it sound as if some giant were grabbing the corners and shaking and kicking at it. Outside, the night sky was utterly white. Cas swallowed. She liked to think of herself as fearless, or at least too focused to pay much attention to fear when she was out there, but this was going to be ghastly to fly in.

"Did they bring a snow-making machine too?" Zirkander asked dryly.

"No, sir."

"All right." He patted her on the shoulder. It was probably a gesture of dismissal, but he was looking toward the side door and chewing on his lip. "Hurry," he murmured, "we could use those devices more than ever for this one."

The words weren't for her, Cas knew, but she couldn't help but wonder at them. "Devices, sir?"

"My archaeologist friend is working on some communications devices from a recent Referatu excavation. I know the thought of magic will make everyone itch, but we've been waiting for the techs to figure out their wireless telegraph for ages, and it sounds like this could be a far better option for flier-to-flier communication anyway."

His *archaeologist* friend? Was that Sardelle? Magical communications? Cas couldn't imagine the general approving that for military use. Or any use. The colonel would be lucky if he didn't get shot for suggesting it. Well, no, maybe not. He was one of the few people in the army who could get away with... a lot.

Cas must have been gaping at him, for he added, "I've already spoken to the others about it. We're a superstitious lot, but the general consensus was that it would make us three times as effective to be able to speak to each other in the air." He grimaced. "For example, Crash could have told me he saw *you* on that outpost before we were all the way home. We could have gone back for you right away."

And gotten everyone mauled by pirates who had solidified their defenses by that point.

"Yes, sir. I was just shocked. I wouldn't think—"

"Colonel, you leading the way?" someone called from the hangar door. Wolf Squadron and Tiger Squadron were lined up, ready to leap into the white sky. Pilots secured in their cockpits stared down at Zirkander. They wanted him leading the way, Cas guessed from the concerned looks on those faces. Their goggles couldn't hide the fact that they were nervous about going out there in this weather.

Speaking of communications, Cas wished there had been a way to warn the city ahead of time. Would two squadrons be enough to defend the capital from that many pirates? If the general had been given advance notice, he could have called in the northern and southern continental air defenses for assistance.

Zirkander lifted a hand in acknowledgment and took a step toward his craft, but the side door banged open, snow swirling inside, along with a figure in a cloak and dress. Cas gaped. Given what Tolemek believed about Sardelle, and her own itchy instincts upon meeting her, Cas hadn't expected her to be wandering around the base. The sergeant from the tram was escorting her in, but he didn't have a hand on his pistol and wasn't restraining her in any way. Did that mean only Tolemek knew who she was? *What* she was? How could Zirkander have kept that hidden if she had been openly fighting with magic at that fortress battle? If a Cofah soldier had seen that, some of the Iskandians must have too. Of course, they were probably still stuck back at that mountain duty station. And Cas doubted there were any telegraphs, wireless or otherwise, snaking up into the Ice Blades range.

The colonel jogged over to the woman. She carried a wooden box under one arm. Something that might have been a sword poked outward under her cloak, but the garment covered it.

Cas watched the door, but nobody else came in. Not that she would have expected Tolemek to wander up here—or be allowed anywhere near the place without being shot at—but she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to him. If Sardelle had her sword with her, Tolemek certainly hadn't gotten his hands on it. It hadn't sounded like he wanted that specific blade, anyway, but what if he had ended up in a battle with the woman? And lost? She wasn't injured, nor was any of her hair even out of place after walking through the storm.

Zirkander met her a few steps inside the door, giving her a hug and a kiss. This earned numerous catcalls and whoops from the watching pilots. Cas looked away. She might have reconciled herself to the idea that the colonel was never going to be an option for her, but that didn't mean she liked watching him kiss other women. Especially not other *sorceress* women.

"That's one beautiful archaeologist," one of the ground crew muttered with longing as he walked past Cas.

Archaeologist, huh. She wanted the whole story—and to know if the colonel really knew what he was doing or if she was using him somehow—but there wasn't time. Zirkander knew it, too, for he kept his kiss short, traded a few words with Sardelle, and accepted the box from her with a wave.

He jogged to the end of the flier line, his hand delving into the box.

It riveted Cas's eyes, because whatever was within emitted a soft blue glow. And Zirkander didn't seem to think anything of it. Crazy how much one's world could change in a few weeks away from home.

The colonel tossed a device—yes, that was a suitably vague word for whatever those things were—up to each pilot. Each of them caught it, but the faces ranged from slightly to extremely concerned. Nobody was as nonchalant as Zirkander. Even he might have been feigning it. Cas had always known him to be twitchy at the mention of magic. Before her time, he had lost a pilot because a military court judged the officer's skills to be too unbelievable for a mundane human being. He hadn't been sentenced to death, but there had been a lot of questions about the man's later suicide.

Zirkander tossed Cas one of the glowing devices as he ran by.

The little blue disk almost looked like a jewel. Or a crystal, Cas realized with a start. Like the flier power supplies. She had always assumed them the result of some secret government research—mundane, technologically based research, because that's what everyone always implied. But was it possible they were also artifacts from the time when sorcerers had walked the continent? And was that time as long past as everyone assumed?

Cas looked at Sardelle, standing near the door, watching the colonel. With concern? Cas couldn't tell. The woman's face might have been sculpted from ivory.

"Flying time, Ahn," Zirkander called, then lifted a hand toward Sardelle and climbed into his flier.

Cas wrapped her hand around the blue object. She had no idea what she was supposed to do with it, but she would have to figure it out later. It was time to go.

. . . . .

As the snow flew in his eyes, the wind tugged at his cloak, the fog wrapped around his legs, and the cold chilled his bare arms, Tolemek thought of the warm, humid jungles of southern Cofahre. Had it only been three days ago he had been there, arranging to have himself captured and thrown into prison?

The wind snapped at his hood, and he grabbed it again, holding it over his eyes with one hand. Between the siren and the storm, the streets should have been empty, but there were squads of armed soldiers running to battle stations, horses and steam wagons charging about, and civilians of all ages standing in doorways, holding rifles or swords as they watched the gray sky. A pack of boys in an alley were gesturing with slingshots and clubs, making battle plans.

Any one of these people would be happy to shoot Tolemek if they saw his bronze skin. He hadn't considered wind when he had chosen

the cloak to hide his features. Of course, he hadn't imagined himself skulking through the city, searching for the source of the fog, either.

Sardelle had promised to come help him after she delivered her box, and he could have waited in the shadow of the butte, but this was his responsibility. He had intended to disable the fog machine so it couldn't be used tonight. He should have destroyed it. That's what he would do now. One way or another. As soon as he found it...

The fog seemed heaviest down by the harbor, so he was slipping and sliding down the icy streets, heading in that direction. A baby squalled in a nearby building, reminding him that not just able-bodied fighters were in danger tonight. While he had been with the Roaming Curse, the pirates had occasionally raided small towns, but they had mostly preyed upon other ships and aircraft. Being down on the ground, where he would witness what their destruction wrought, he did not relish this.

"So, stop it before it starts, eh?"

Except he feared he was already too late. A boom rang out from some artillery station at the north end of the harbor. The first of the pirate ships must have been spotted. Not surprisingly, they were coming in on the opposite side of the city from the airbase.

Tolemek had been glancing in that direction often, expecting to see the fliers taking off—and also expecting Cas to be in one of them. The snow made it hard to see anything, but when he reached the waterfront, he was closer to the butte, and he spotted the first of the craft shooting over the edge of the butte, its bronze wings outstretched. Others followed on its tail, struggling to remain steady in the wind, but eventually gaining elevation and arrowing across the harbor toward the cannons firing in the north. From the ground, they truly did look like the dragons of old, or at least like the faded pictures in ancient books, even if their wings didn't flap and their movements were directed by propellers. According to legend, those old dragons had been gold, silver, and bronze, with the gold being the most powerful—physically and mentally. He wondered if the Iskandians had thought it would have been hubris to color their fliers gold, or if the metal had simply been in short supply.

An armored steam wagon clanked past, and Tolemek hugged the shadows. The fog helped hide him, but the wind was a constant enemy. Had the air been quiet, the gray murk would have risen higher and in greater density. Still, it was thicker down here by the water, so he knew he was heading in the right direction.

Following the line of the buildings on the main street, he jogged along, eyeing the docks stretching out into the choppy dark waters. Believing he might find clues there, Tolemek tried to remember which dock Cas had landed the dirigible on. He didn't see any sign of the big

balloon and assumed he was looking for the remains of an explosion-riddled wreck rather than a gently damaged aircraft.

Out beyond the breakwater, the surf roared, competing with the booms from the cannons and the shrieking wind. A hint of something burning reached his nose, something that smelled of charred rubber, cloth, and machinery, not simply of the coal warming the stoves in nearby buildings. He squinted through the snow and down a long dock. Yes, there.

The envelope covering and frame had been destroyed, as had part of the dock—the metal remains of the cabin, the walls peeled back like warped flower petals, were half-sunken in the water. The surrounding merchant and fishing ships were also damaged, and in spots, nothing but a couple feet of the mast remained above the surface to mark their icy graves. Interestingly, the fog didn't seem to be coming from that spot. Had someone removed the machine before the explosion?

Tolemek waited for another armored vehicle to pass, then trotted down the dock. Halfway along, the boards grew warped, and some creaked ominously under his weight.

A boom sounded, not from the end of the harbor this time, but from overhead. The first of the pirate ships was visible now, a black shadow against the black sky, only a few running lights making it visible at all. It was hard to tell through the snow, but he thought it might be the *Night Hunter*. Goroth's vessel, leading the way, whether he was standing next to the helmsman or not.

Standing on the dock with nothing for cover, Tolemek felt vulnerable. He hustled along. Best to get this business taken care of quickly. He told himself that Maktu, the helmsman, couldn't pick him out from way up there, and wouldn't know he had turned against the pirates—and betrayed the captain—anyway, but his shoulder blades itched as he advanced on the remains of the freighter.

Spot fires still burned, on the dock and on wood that had been spat into the nearby water. All that awful wood paneling. Tolemek picked his way into the remains of the cabin, searching for clues. At first, he avoided looking in the navigation area or toward engineering, not wanting to see the bodies of the men he had knocked out, men he assumed had been killed in the explosion, but he couldn't search for clues without looking everywhere, and something soon became apparent: there were no bodies. Either they had been thrown free, or whoever had plucked out the fog machine had arrived in time to pull Goroth out too. Stone Heart? Most of the captains wouldn't risk themselves for each other, and would just as soon take over another captain's ship rather than help him return to it, but Stone Heart must have seen some value in saving Goroth. Which meant Tolemek had

another enemy skulking around down here. Goroth wouldn't forgive his betrayal.

The wreckage didn't offer up a single clue, other than confirming that the fog machine was gone. Tolemek looked up and down the waterfront, then up at the sky. An airship could have come in and extracted everything, but not without the Iskandians noticing. It hadn't been snowing yet when that explosion had gone off.

With the broken boards of the dock threatening to drop out from beneath him, Tolemek scanned the harbor itself. The sky was less dim than it had been a moment before, for more pirate ships were appearing beneath the clouds, their decks lit, and the fliers were streaking out to meet them, their hulls burnished orange by the glow of their power crystals. Even so, Tolemek's gaze almost skimmed past the dark shape bobbing in the waves beyond the docks.

"Not an airship," he whispered. "A sailing ship."

The Roaming Curse *did* have some, though they might also have recently acquired this one. He couldn't see any identification—he could barely make out the ship—but who else would be foolishly sitting out there in the harbor on a night like this? Someone planning to lead the raid portion of the attack?

Realizing he might be visible to whoever was out there, thanks to the fires still burning around the wreck, Tolemek ran back up the dock, into the shadows and fog. He followed the waterfront, eyeing the smaller vessels tied up here and there, and finally selecting a yacht with a lifeboat. There was nobody about on the docks to complain about theft. He dropped the smaller boat, found two oars, and climbed in.

He hadn't rowed more than five meters when a cannonball screeched out of the sky and slammed into the yacht. Wood shot out in every direction. Tolemek dropped into the bottom of the rowboat as debris pelted its sides and flew overhead.

He gulped when he sat up, returning to the oars. The yacht was still upright, but he doubted it would be for long.

With the fog over his head, he didn't see how someone could be aiming for him, but it was hard not to think that way. He rowed into the harbor, regardless. If he had to swim over to that ship to disable the fog machine and deal with Goroth and Stone Heart, he would. It had occurred to him, as soon as he had seen the fog, that Cas might believe he had been lying to her, that he had never attempted to disable the machine in the first place and that perhaps he hadn't left his people behind after all. He did *not* want her thinking that.

Gunfire spat overhead, one of the fliers swooping low. Tolemek thought it might be diving toward the dark craft in the water, but it came up under one of the airships, scouring its belly with bullets. Was

that Cas? He had no way to know. There were more than twenty fliers up there.

Though it took longer than he would have liked, he rowed north first, so he could come at the ship from the seaward side rather than from the city, where the lights might silhouette him, fog or not.

You're wasting your time.

Tolemek almost dropped an oar. Jaxi, again. After he and Sardelle had parted ways, he had assumed the soulblade wouldn't communicate with him further. He wouldn't have expected it to have such range—he was still surprised it talked to him at all. He had assumed that was something reserved for the relationship between blade and handler.

Sardelle isn't always chatty. I get lonesome.

What do you mean I'm wasting my time? Do you know who's out there? If it were a boat full of fishermen too cheap to pay the dock fees, he would feel idiotic for this long side trip.

Your people. And they know you're coming. Might as well go straight up to them.

And get shot?

They're not going to shoot you. They have something far worse in mind.

Tolemek went back to rowing. The waves and wind were trying to push him to the south, and he would shoot past the craft if he wasn't careful. *What might that be?*

Something that I'll kill you over if it comes to pass.

Given the soulblade's sense of humor—if one could call it that—Tolemek's first thought was that Jaxi was joking. But there was no follow-up to suggest that was the case.

Are you and Sardelle nearby? He wondered if he would need help—and if they would be willing to give it—in dealing with the pirates.

Not yet. A family was hurt. Sardelle stopped to heal them, ignoring the fact that if they figure out she used magic to do so, they'll turn around and accuse her of witchcraft, which will get her killed in this town, no matter who her boyfriend is.

The exasperation in Jaxi's tone made him think Sardelle might do such things often.

She was trained as a healer. She'd probably even heal you.

You wouldn't?

I wasn't trained as a healer, so I wouldn't have to make that choice. Besides, I know what you've done to my people.

With the side of the dark ship looming ahead of him, Tolemek had enough to worry about without wondering how a sword knew all of his secrets, but he caught himself breathing shallowly and rapidly anyway. His hands had been cold earlier; now he could feel sweat slicking the oar grips. Jaxi had bad timing.

What were you trained to do? Tolemek wasn't sure why he asked; he probably didn't want to know.

Pyrotechnics. Along with the word came a quick impression of a young woman, little more than a kid, with red hair in pigtails, grinning as she hurled streams of fire at an encroaching Cofah army.

A dark figure walking along the deck of the ship stopped and leaned against the railing. Yes, Jaxi was right. Whoever was out there had been waiting for him.

As the rowboat glided up to the larger ship, Tolemek dipped into his bag of vials and gadgets. He touched one of the leather balls, but bypassed it, fingers delving for a hard cylinder in the bottom with a pull-tab top. Several other shadows had joined the first. Given the roar of the sea and the buzz of the propellers overhead, it was amazing that he heard the loading of rifles, but the sound of bullets being chambered cut right across the water to him.

"Good evening, Mek," came Goroth's voice from the shadows, utterly calm, as if there weren't fliers and airships battling overhead. "Why don't you come aboard? We have something to chat about." It was a stranger's voice, nothing of the years of friendship in it. Tolemek knew he had made his choice, and he didn't regret it, but he also hadn't expected to have to face Goroth again a mere hour after sticking a needle in his neck.

"That might not have a salutary effect on my health," Tolemek said.

"Oh, we're not planning to kill you. We're planning to have you watch. From a distance. You'll have to let us know what distance would be suitable. And how long we have to wait before going ashore. We're here to loot, after all, not become victims of our own craftiness."

"What craftiness would that be?" Tolemek croaked. His mouth had gone dry. Goroth's allusions were obvious, though Tolemek didn't see how it could be possible. After seeing Tanglewood and hearing about Camp Eveningson, he had destroyed all of the canisters of the death gas. Very carefully. In a crematorium, with a device for delaying the dropping of them into the fire, to ensure he was far, far away when it happened. It had been a mistake to invent something so deadly that it terrified even him, but he hadn't truly understood that until that day.

"Stone Heart here was kind enough to see our freighter's distress and come pull us out before the authorities charged up. He even took care of those authorities with that explosion, so there wouldn't be any witnesses to his arrival. And I, though confused and betrayed, had the presence of mind to grab the bag I brought with me before he set the charges, the bag that I'd packed with a canister taken from your laboratory years ago."

“I destroyed all of the samples,” Tolemek said. His rowboat had reached the larger vessel and was bumping against its side.

“Not all of them. I took one before you left to destroy them,” Goroth said. “I couldn’t let you make that much power disappear at a whim, not when I might one day need it.”

“All this time, you had that canister in your cabin?” Tolemek choked at the idea, imagining a strong wind striking the ship and the canister being knocked over and activated in some cabinet, the poison blasting out to kill everyone aboard.

“Well insulated, I assure you. I’m not a fool.”

“What about when the first *Night Hunter* was shot down last summer? Did you have it in your cabin then?”

“I did, and I retrieved it before we had to abandon the ship.”

Tolemek pushed his hair away from his face, not caring that his hood fell back too. The past didn’t matter. What mattered was... “You have it on this ship now?”

“No, my old friend. It’s already been deployed in the city, the timer set. It’s in a place where it can do maximum damage. You’ll never find it.”

“Maximum damage. You mean kill the most people.”

“Yes,” Goroth said. “Yes, I do. How convenient that it’ll destroy all of the resistance, yet it will leave the contents of the banks and museums untouched.”

“It won’t destroy *all* of the resistance,” Tolemek said, trying to sound calm, though inside he was alternating between quailing and raging. He looked up to the sky. The fliers, always conscious of the threat of ground fire, usually stayed high above their enemies. They should be high enough to survive the release of the death gas, but what would they come back to when they landed? A city full of dead, their organs boiled, their skin melted off from the inside out. And Cas... what would she think? That he had double-crossed her. That all along he had been working with Goroth.

“What use is a fighter squadron without a populace to defend?” Goroth asked. “They’ll be too busy mourning to trouble our retreat. Our retreat with cargo holds full of loot. The Cofah might even give us a medal for destroying the capital city of their enemy, something they’ve failed to do in hundreds of years of war.” Goroth propped his arm on the railing, leaning closer to Tolemek. “Climb aboard. As I said, we have questions for you. We want to make sure we don’t get caught too close.”

“Do you,” Tolemek whispered. And then what? They shot him once they were safe? Some offer.

“Yes, and, believe it or not, I have no wish to see you killed this way, either. Come back to the *Night Hunter* with me. All will be

forgotten. Or, if not forgotten, at least forgiven. So long as you continue to help make me a powerful captain with few who will contest my right to reign."

It sounded more like he wanted to be a king than a captain. Tolemek rubbed his face. He needed to figure out a way to locate the canister and stop the aerosol from being released. For Cas, for the people of the city, and... for his own sanity. He couldn't darken his soul with another Tanglewood. He just couldn't.

"Captains," came a terse call from the bow of the ship. "There's another boat approaching from the starboard side."

Two of the figures who had been aiming their rifles at Tolemek jogged to the other side, disappearing behind the cabin. Several remained, and Goroth would doubtlessly be armed, too, but it might be the best chance Tolemek would get. He traced the pull tab on his canister with his thumb. He could blow up the ship with the contents, but if everyone aboard was dead or unconscious, who would tell him where the canister was? The timer could be set for a maximum of an hour, so he didn't have much time. If they had already set it and returned to this boat...

"Friend of yours?" Goroth asked casually, though there was an icy layer to his voice, a suggestion that it had better *not* be.

"My only friend here is up there." Tolemek pointed to the sky.

"I see." Goroth's tone was even icier.

Perhaps saying "only" had been a mistake. Laying down the cards too early, letting Goroth know he refused the offer.

"It's dark," came the soft call from the other side of the ship. "Looks abandoned. No sail up, no oars. Like it's floating free, but, uh, it's coming straight at us."

A premonition tickled Tolemek's senses. He had never experienced any of his sister's talent for magic, and didn't think even she, in her more lucid moments, could speak into other people's minds, but he called out with his thoughts nonetheless: *Jaxi?*

He didn't receive an answer. Not surprising. It wasn't as if *he* were linked to the soulblade somehow, not the way its handler would be. Communication would always be per Jaxi's whims.

Still, he had to try, in some hope that the soulblade would check in with him first.

Jaxi, if you can hear me, don't hurt anyone on the ship, at least not the man in front of me. We need to know where the canister is and how much time remains on the countdown. We need—

The sky brightened behind Goroth's vessel. And then it turned to flame.

Tolemek had been standing in the rowboat, half convinced he had to climb onto the ship with Goroth, but he stumbled back now, raising

a hand to protect his eyes from the sudden light—and the heat. A man on the other side screamed. Splashes sounded—people diving or falling overboard?

In the rowboat and on the other side of the now-flaming cabin, Tolemek didn't face the full intensity of the attack, but he scrambled to the far side of his little vessel, the heat forcing him to back up.

Jaxi, he tried again, his mind filled with that image of the soulblade—or maybe who the spirit had been before she turned into a sword—hurling streams of fire. *Don't kill them. I'm not just being sentimental. We need the location of the—*

Rifles fired—the men on the boat shooting at whoever was attacking them. Shooting at something anyway.

A second fireball struck on the heels of the first. The crackling of flames and the snapping of wood rose over the clamor of the battle going on above the harbor. The heat seared Tolemek's face. He was tempted to row away, to put distance between himself and the burning craft, but he had to find out where the canister was located.

Goroth was crouching, somewhat protected by the cabin, though flames were leaping from its roof and sides.

"Goroth," Tolemek called, intending to offer the man refuge on his rowboat.

Throw the grenade, a voice in his mind ordered. Jaxi.

What? Tolemek stared down at the cylinder in his hand. Goroth had turned to face him. He couldn't hurl a grenade at the man.

Sink the ship before these murderers cause any more trouble. If you don't, I will.

Tolemek lowered his hand and stuck the cylinder back in the bag. *I can't. And you shouldn't, either. We have to find out—*

Goroth had his foot lifted to the railing, prepared to leap overboard, or perhaps to jump for Tolemek's rowboat, but he was too late. Something struck the ship with the power of a bomb. It exploded from within.

The shockwave hurled Tolemek backward, almost knocking him out of the rowboat. As it was, he landed hard on his back, the air blasted out of him. The explosion lit the sky, and for a moment, the fliers and the airships were highlighted overhead, and he could see the faces of the men on one of the airships, none of them looking as afraid for their lives as they should have, given the fliers swooping all around.

Blinking, Tolemek pushed himself to his elbows. He stared at the spot where the sailing ship had been. There was nothing except flotsam now, boards burning on the dark, choppy water. Neither Goroth nor any of the other men aboard were anywhere to be seen, but something that looked like a severed arm floated by. Tolemek

swallowed hard. He hadn't meant... when he had chosen to walk away from his old friend, he hadn't meant for it to end like this.

The black shape of a yacht rose from the water on the other side of the flotsam. It was wreathed in fog, the city lights hazy beyond it. Presumably Sardelle was somewhere on that dark ship and had been as much a part of that attack as her soulblade.

"What have you done?" Tolemek whispered. In a city of hundreds of thousands, how would he find that timer before it counted down to destruction?

Chapter 15

Cas watched Apex and Beeline on the runway before her, picking up speed as they headed for the edge of the cliff and the harbor beyond. She was inching along, waiting for the route to clear, and trying not to be alarmed by the rocking of the flier as gales swept across the butte, tugging at her wings. The snow flying sideways through her vision and sticking to her goggles wasn't nearly as alarming as the wind. The fliers might appear to be made of bronze, but that was just a coating. They were as lightweight as the engineers could make them, with the machine guns and the pilots being the heaviest part of the load. Taking off without crashing was going to be almost as challenging as landing without crashing. The number of propellers on the bottom of the harbor attested to the fact that countless pilots had stalled the engines or run into other trouble even on normal days. The squadron didn't usually fly at night, much less in storms. This was madness.

But the pirate ships had come into view, veering in from the north and angling toward the city. A massive dark shadow on the horizon had to be the outpost. The pirates were just as mad as the Iskandians for flying in these conditions.

Cas reminded herself that she had been eager to come out here—no one would have faulted her for staying on the ground tonight—and she tried to ignore the fact that her hands were already sweaty in her gloves. The flying had never come as naturally for her as the shooting—in flight school, she had thrown up more than once learning maneuvers with names like the zoom loop or the corkscrew—but she had never been scared of being in a craft, either.

"Might have something to do with the fact that you *crashed* last time," Cas muttered.

"That you, Ahn?" came Zirkander's voice... out of her pocket.

Her hand flinched, and the wings responded with a dubious wobble. Her pocket—that was where she had stuffed the little blue crystal.

"Uh, yes," she said, regaining control of the stick.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," the colonel said. "I need you up here, second point. Wolf Squadron, we're heading for the outpost. Lance, you and Tiger Squadron clean up the rest of the riffraff in the sky."

The responding yes sirs came not only from Major Lance but from a dozen other mouths as well. Could *everyone* hear and speak to each other through those crystals? Wonderful. Cas made a vow not to talk to herself as much as usual. Before, the squadrons had always communicated with each other through hand signals and dips of the wings. She could see where this additional option would be useful, but it would take some getting used to. Nobody better start blathering in her ear—or from her pocket—when she was concentrating on a target.

She patted the side of the cockpit, hoping someone had thought to wedge a Mark 500 in there. She was the only pilot she knew of who used anything other than the guns mounted on the flier, but there were times when a sniper rifle was perfect for her. It wouldn't be *her* rifle, lovingly zeroed to her eye, since that was at the bottom of the Seven Tides Strait, but it would do for the night. And, yes, there was the familiar outline of a Mark 500, strapped in as securely as she was.

Cas took a deep breath, drove the stick forward, and accelerated toward the cliff. As soon as the flier left the ground, the wind pummeled it, tearing at the wings as if they were frail kites. The nose sank, the choppy black waters below filling her view. Cas forced herself to ease back gently, making subtle movements, finding as much equilibrium as she could with the icy northern gale pushing her back toward the cliff. Snow blasted against her goggles and frosted her cheeks. It felt like they were flying at fifteen thousand feet instead of scant meters above the harbor. With the propeller roaring in front of her, she couldn't hear the creaks and groans of the cables, but felt them through the stick, sensing the craft straining against the air currents. She skimmed above the water for a moment—the wind was calmer down there—then climbed up, angling for the position to W-83's left, to join the others in formation above the nearest airships.

"Does anyone else think it was bloody inconsiderate of these pirates to attack during a snow storm?" someone asked.

People's voices sounded tinny through the crystals, and Cas didn't recognize every speaker immediately. She thought that was someone in Tiger Squadron.

"We'll have to punish them for their impudence." That must be Apex. Nobody else used words like impudence while concentrating on flying.

"Gonna be hard punishing anyone if my wings are scraped off all over the cliff. That wind is rough."

Cas was glad she wasn't the only one who'd had trouble. Even now,

flying straight was a challenge.

"Please, Duck, you can barely make that takeoff when the conditions are perfect. It's becoming obvious why Goat Squadron transferred you."

"It's not my fault so many cliffs and so much water are involved here. Everyone knows, a flier is meant to take off from a field. All you have to look out for then are the ostriches and llamas."

"That's one rural field."

The chitchat was relaxing Cas, though she still wasn't sure how she felt about having the mess hall conversations going on when they were on their way into battle. She used her scarf to wipe her goggles and looked toward 83. Zirkander glanced over his shoulder in her direction—to make sure she was there? Of course she was there. She wasn't going to let him down by falling apart after one stupid little crash. That hadn't even been her fault. The battleship's guns never would have caught her if the engine hadn't stalled. She gave him the two-fingers-up salute. She was ready.

"We're going in," Zirkander said. "Mission essential talk only from here on out. Speculation on what Duck was doing in that field there to attract all those llamas and ostriches will have to wait until we land."

Cas smirked. She had started to mind the wind beating at her wings a little less.

"Masser, Blazer, Crash, you're with me," Zirkander said. "We're gunning for the balloons. The new ammo is in, incendiaries every fourth round. I don't care how reinforced that material is; it shouldn't stand a chance."

"Yes, sir."

"Ahn, you know your job. Take out the gunners and the brass. Thasel and Pimples, watch her back."

"I didn't notice much brass on the pirate captains' hats," Cas said.

"Then look for the ugliest brutes on the platform. Those are probably the leaders."

"Will do, sir."

"Everyone else, take your opportunities and watch our asses from above," Zirkander said. "You know I don't like having pirates sniffing around back there."

"I'm not keen on *anyone* sniffing around my ass," someone muttered.

"I might not mind the colonel's archaeologist."

That drew snickers from the men, but everyone knew to fall silent after that. Zirkander dipped his starboard wing twice, then led the way into a dive. They had reached a spot a couple of miles from the shoreline and were flying over the six parallel balloons of the outpost. Other airships dotted the nearby skies, some closer to the city, but

Tiger Squadron was forming up to deal with them.

In the beginning, Cas followed Zirkander and the others, then she dropped lower for access to the massive platform. The ships that had been docked there the day before were all flying independently now, or had stayed out at sea, leaving this insanity for others to partake in, so she had little trouble seeing the guns, the propellers, and other key targets. The gunners would have little trouble seeing her too. Thasel and Pimples weaved behind her, trying to draw some of their attention.

Cas charged in head-on to start with, using the twin guns mounted at the front of the flier. The shots rang in her ears, even louder than the churning propeller. She targeted two grim-faced pirates crouched behind the giant gun mounted on the corner. They were aiming for her even as she blew rounds at them. One went down, but the other used the artillery weapon to hide behind. Shells shrieked past the cockpit, invisible in the night sky. She weaved unpredictably to make a harder target, then arced in, finding the angle to take down the second gunner. When he collapsed, she pounded the gun itself, followed by the propeller below it. Impressive streams of black smoke flowed from that corner of the outpost.

She was close enough to see faces on the platform—men with rifles waited, in addition to those manning other artillery weapons—when she pushed forward on the stick, diving below the outpost, almost scraping her cap off on the framework below. Guns fired behind her, her escort adding to the damage. Cas glanced back, making sure Thasel and Pimples had both dived below the platform too. They skimmed along the bottom behind her. Cas eyed the blocky shadows, the hint of pipes and vents, and wondered if any crucial targets might lie down there. But it was too dark to see much. And the colonel had given her a different assignment.

“Thasel, Pimples,” she said, still feeling silly for talking toward her pocket, “I’m going to parallel the outpost to look for the colonel’s brass. I’m pulling out my rifle.”

“We’re with you,” Thasel said, his voice calm, professional, and as humorless as always.

Pimples, on the other hand, responded with, “In other words, you’re going to be flying with your knee for the next five minutes, and we should stay back so you don’t crash into us. Thanks for the warning.”

Cas snorted but couldn’t come up with a suitable comeback, since it was essentially true. If she thought her flier was quaking in the breeze now, this would be a true challenge. And a challenge of her aim as well.

She had flown out from beneath the platform and circled back,

gaining in altitude, so she could come in from above the balloons and not risk her craft until she was ready to start firing.

"Nice shooting, Colonel," someone said.

Cas saw why the compliment had been thrown when she swooped back toward the outpost. One of those balloons had been damaged. *More* than damaged. Flames were leaping from a hole in the top, like a volcano erupting.

"Just demonstrating the new incendiary rounds," Zirkander drawled.

"And lighting a real nice candle too. 'Preciate the light."

When the squadron hadn't destroyed any of the outpost's balloons the day before, Cas had feared they might be reinforced somehow, so she was relieved to see the damage. The extra light might help her identify targets too. She unstrapped her rifle as she sailed in, paralleling the big platform. She wiped her goggles with her scarf one more time, clearing off a gray sludge made of snow and engine oil, then lifted her weapon, bracing an elbow on the side of the cockpit. She kept the stick as steady as she could with her knee and picked her targets. Gunner, gunner, ugly face bellowing orders, gunner—damn, clipped that one— and another ugly.

"Four o'clock, Ahn," came Thasel's detached voice at the same time as Pimples barked, "Look out, Ahn!"

His shout startled her, and her knee slipped. In theory, the flier was supposed to continue straight and level when there weren't any hands on the stick, but the wind was blasting theories to dust tonight. Her craft pitched to the side alarmingly, and she almost lost her rifle. A stream of bullets screeched past her, several tearing into her upward-tilted wing. Cas jammed the rifle to the side of her seat and took the stick.

"You all right, Ahn?" Zirkander asked.

"Fine." Cas righted herself, using the bottom of the outpost for protection, though the tufts of flaming material raining down on either side suggested it might not be a good hiding spot for long. "Apparently pirates don't like being shot at."

"Not just *at*," Pimples said. "Shot dead. Another pass on the other side, and they won't have anyone at the guns."

"I'm sure they can find reinforcements," Cas said, though she did intend to go back and attack the other side. By now, she had come out from under the outpost. She circled back, the lights of the city visible through a lapse in the snow. Interestingly, the big station hadn't moved much closer. She spotted burning wreckage down in the harbor. One of the airships down most likely. Good.

"Somehow I don't think they'll get many volunteers," Pimples chortled.

“Better not look so impressive, Ahn,” someone said, “or you’ll get kissed again when you and Pimples land.”

She shook her head, thinking of the kiss she had shared with Tolemek and hoping he was staying out of sight down there. She dug out her rifle and lined herself up for another attack. Another balloon was up in flames. Also good. Sinking the outpost would get rid of a lot of pirates at once, something sky *and* sea freighter captains would thank them for.

“Going in again,” she announced, then did so, propping her elbow on the side of the cockpit again. She could simply use the machine gun, like everyone else did, but she had always preferred perfect accuracy to flinging a slew of bullets and hoping to get lucky. Her father’s influence, doubtlessly. Besides, the delay from the synchronization gear that kept the bullets from hitting the propeller always irritated her. Everyone else said they couldn’t tell, but it was apparently her one thing to be hypersensitive about. She blamed her father for that too.

She eyed the city lights for a moment, wondering if he was home. His work took him out of the capital, and sometimes to other continents altogether, so she had no idea. If he *was* there, would he thank her if she and the other fliers were successful in keeping the pirates out of the city? He might not fear for his own life, unless bombs were dropped high up into the hills, but he had a lot of valuables at home that might attract looters. She wouldn’t hold her breath for a show of gratitude, though; he hadn’t sent one yet.

On her second pass at the outpost, she knocked out three more gunners and three gesticulating older men she hoped were captains giving orders. Nobody came close to hitting her flier. Between the flames from the balloons and the smoke wafting from propellers and other crucial areas, the outpost didn’t have much ability left to fight. It might have been different if Tolemek’s fog had blanketed the entire harbor and stretched up into the sky, but these pirates had been outmaneuvered from the start. Cas secured the Mark 500 again, then switched to strafing the remaining balloons with the rest of the squadron.

“That snake nest is about to drop out of the sky,” someone crooned.

“Don’t get cocky,” Crash said. “The weather’s getting worse. Just finish up so we can get out of here.”

He was right. The snow had let up somewhat, but the howling wind had picked up its intensity. There was a crosswind coming in from the sea too. Cas struggled to control her flier.

“One more balloon should do it,” Zirkander said. “Focus fire on the aft one. And give your neighbors some distance. We’re being bobbed around like buoys out here.”

“Is anyone else wondering why they haven’t started bombing the city?” someone from Tiger Squadron asked.

“I am,” Zirkander said. “It’s like they’re waiting for something.”

“Maybe they’re enraptured with us,” Pimples said.

“I believe the word you’re thinking of is enthralled,” Apex said, “though neither seems likely.”

“Thanks,” Pimples said. “I’d be lost without your guidance.”

“What’s the word for it when an officer kisses another officer in front of a whole bunch of other officers?” someone asked.

Cas winced, imagining Pimples’ embarrassment. This wasn’t the time for squad-wide mockery. W-83 was busy blowing flaming holes in the balloon he had selected for targeting.

“How long before everyone forgets about that?” Pimples asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s sure going to take more than an hour.”

“Enough, Wolves,” Zirkander said as his craft flew out of the flames leaping from the balloon. The platform sagged, the aft end dipping down at an impossible angle, and pirates tumbling over the side. Others clawed their way into buildings and hung from lampposts. “We’ll mock Pimples thoroughly once we’re on the ground with beers in our hands.”

“Gee, thank you so much, sir,” Pimples said.

Several quieter moments passed, with nothing except the thrum of the propellers and the bangs of the guns speaking to the night. Cas focused on the shooting and tried to relax, though the wind had her whole body tense.

“Look out,” several people cried at once.

Cas glanced in all directions, thinking the warning might be for her. But two Tiger Squadron fliers had clipped wings or crashed in some other way. Both craft were spiraling toward the harbor. There was no chance for the pilots to pull up—they’d lost all control. The fliers plunged into the water, the wings ripped off by the impact and hurled free. Cas stared in horror, reminded that nature was every bit as dangerous as enemy bullets.

. . . . .

Zirkander’s house. That was the only place Tolemek could think of to check for the canister. Those pirates had been searching it, but they might have done more than that. Perhaps the attempt to blow it up had been a ruse. Or maybe they had placed the device nearby and had wanted to cover their tracks.

As he pondered this, Tolemek rowed toward the other vessel. A great screech of metal sounded overhead, and the sky lit up. Until then, he had been more concerned about his own problems than the air battle in the sky, but seeing two fliers plummeting from the clouds

had a way of riveting a man's attention. Several of the pirate airships had already crashed, but nearly a mile away, at the north end of the harbor. These fliers would strike down much closer to him. Even before they smashed into the water, he doubted there were survivors —and then the wings were torn off by the impact, and the cockpits disappeared beneath the waves. One of the torn pieces of wing flew in his direction, and he lifted a hand—as if that would do any good—but it bounced down with such force that it skipped off the water again and flew over his head before landing.

Tolemek rubbed his face, staring. For the most part, the pilots were strangers to him, indeed he would have considered them enemies mere hours ago, but he stared in horror at the froth and bubbles, having no way to know if Cas had been in one of those fliers.

"Pirate," came a soft call from ahead of him.

Sardelle crouched in the shadows, on the sailboat he had been rowing toward. It had drifted closer now—or he had—and he could make out the figure on the deck.

"Tolemek," he said, not that it mattered at the moment.

"There's little time. One of the pilots lives. I have to help."

"The whole city is in danger if Goroth told me the truth, but I don't know where—"

"Jaxi does." Sardelle shifted her weight, then tossed something to Tolemek—her sword scabbard. "I'll catch up." Her requisitioned yacht was gliding past him, heading unerringly toward the spot where the closest flier had disappeared.

When Tolemek caught the weapon, he stared at it for a moment, before laying it on the floor of the boat and rowing for shore. "You wanted a soulblade..." He looked down at the weapon in its scabbard, no hint of glowing or magic about it. "You're going to talk to me, right?" Because otherwise he had no idea where to go.

Yes, I'm done arguing with Sardelle now.

About healing people?

About tossing me into some pirate's hands. Especially a pirate who came here with the intention of stealing me.

That wasn't my exact intention. Tolemek threw his back into the rowing, not knowing how much time they had or how far they had to travel.

Up to the butte. The device is going up and down the side of the cliff, attached to the bottom of a tram cabin.

The tram on the airbase? Tolemek slapped the oars into the water with more vigor than the task required. *You saw that in Goroth's mind?*

Yes.

The airbase. How am I supposed to get past the soldiers guarding the gate? Not to mention riding their manned tram without being spotted. How

did Goroth even get it up there to start with?

The captain hadn't been here any longer than Tolemek. And he had been unconscious half the time. How had he managed so much?

He has men to order around. You seem to be lacking in that area.

Yes, it's hard to get people to defect en masse with you. The rowboat bumped against the dock, and Tolemek climbed out, not bothering to tie the craft.

Do you not have more of your devices for knocking humans unconscious?

One. How's your magic? Any chance you'll let me use it if I get stuck?

I'll use it if I *get stuck. It would inconvenience Sardelle if she had to retrieve me from some military research facility.*

In other words, I'm on my own, and you're only here to guide me to the device.

There's the swift thinking that leads me to believe you might actually have the brainpower to be an evil inventor.

Just... an inventor.

The device kissing the bottom of the tram cabin gives validity to my adjective.

Tolemek wished he could object more meaningfully, but if the sword was in his head and knew everything he knew...

He reached the head of the dock and turned onto the waterfront street, tugging his hood over his head again. With Goroth's ship destroyed and the fog machine on the bottom of the harbor, only the snow remained for cover, and the wind was blowing most of that away. The street was busier than ever with soldiers and armored vehicles, many with artillery weapons mounted on them, stationed every block or two. Their focus was toward the sky, but they might notice a suspicious figure running along the street. Tolemek did his best to use the shadows of the buildings to hide his travel. He was about to cut through an alley and hope the next street over was less populated—and paralleled the waterfront so he wouldn't get lost—when a pair of cavalrymen on horseback trotted out of the alley toward him, their rifles resting across their thighs.

Keep going, Jaxi instructed.

Though he had his reservations, Tolemek did so, hugging a stone wall in hopes that the soldiers would assume he was just a helpful soul out for a walk and ready to beat down pirates with his sword if need be.

The men didn't so much as look his way.

You're welcome.

You can keep them from seeing me?

You're not invisible, but they were distracted, and probably won't remember your passing unless someone brings it up.

Handy.

Yes. I hope my obvious versatility isn't making you think of stealing me again.

Tolemek turned onto the street that he hoped paralleled the waterfront. With the butte looming ahead, he shouldn't be able to lose his way. *I was never thinking that. I just wanted to ask—*

I know what you want. If there are other soulblades out there still—and I hope that is the case, because you don't know how depressing it is to be the last of your kind—we haven't located them yet.

"Oh." Though Tolemek's priority was finding the canister before the timer ran out, he couldn't help but feel disappointed. *You said yet. Does that mean—*

It's not our priority.

What is?

At the moment, keeping Sardelle's new soul snozzle alive.

Tolemek curled a lip, more at the idea of Zirkander as anyone's 'soul snozzle'—whatever that was—than because a sorceress might fall in love.

Listen, Jaxi said, *no soulblade would want to bond with a crazy girl, anyway.*

Tolemek clenched his fist as he ran. *She's not crazy. She just needs help understanding her powers.*

Maybe so, but there were always so few soulblades in the world that we could be highly selective with who we chose.

The statement sounded perfectly reasonable, but it was perfectly frustrating as well. Another wasted research trip.

No, not wasted. He gazed up toward the sky, praying that Cas was still up there and still healthy. Even if there was no future for them, he wouldn't regret anything that had happened this past week. He would only regret having to leave her. Or losing her. He frowned at the harbor, though he couldn't see where the fliers had crashed.

That much I can give you. She's fine.

It was probably only in his imagination that the sword sounded apologetic. But maybe Jaxi actually regretted that she had to say no to his hopes for his sister.

We're not gods; we can't be the answer to everyone's problems.

The gates of the airbase came into view, and Tolemek slowed down, pressing himself against a wall and digging into his sack. He still had the one knockout ball and the grenade as well. He squinted past the gate, where snow swept along the dark vertical wall of the butte. The tram cabin looked to be at the top rather than the bottom. Not good. His aerosol was heavier than air, so even if the rocket element wasn't activated, the gas would descend upon the houses at the base of the cliff, probably drifting farther out into the city as well.

He patted the leather ball. He would have to use it on the guards and try to sneak over to the tram without anyone noticing him. And then he had to hope he could remove the canister and disarm it, also with nobody noticing. Unfortunately, he hadn't brought tools for fine work.

I don't suppose you can disarm it from here, Jaxi? That would certainly save some trouble.

I can sense that it's fastened to the bottom of the cabin. Disarming it... I would rather leave that task for you. It looks complex, inside and outside. Better to have its creator handle that. He doubtlessly has a steady hand and a familiarity with the contraption.

I see, you're all compliments now. Tolemek imagined himself hanging out of the cabin, trying to disarm the device while fumbling in the dark under the floor.

I don't want to be the one to slay half the people in the city, Jaxi thought.

I don't, either.

Good, because I was going to threaten to kill you if you weren't enthusiastic enough in disarming your contraption.

I'm glad you're not interested in being stolen, because you would make an abysmal teacher for my sister. Tolemek crept closer to the soldiers guarding the gate, until they spotted him, at which pointed he lifted a hand, as if to greet them, then feigned a slip on the ice. He rolled the leather ball along the street toward them, and dropped to his hands and knees, hoping they would be too fascinated by his fall to notice the ball.

"That's the same man who knocked out the gate guards at Fort Marsh." The speaker flung a hand in the direction of the other installation. Ah, the word had gotten around quickly.

"Watch out for that ball." The second man kicked it before the sides peeled back to emit the smoke. It bounced up the street and didn't start emitting the gas until it was out of their range.

The first man leveled a rifle at Tolemek. He rolled to the side, expecting a barrage of bullets. He wasn't disappointed. They skipped off the cobblestones, near his head. He gave up on rolling and jumped to his feet, sprinting toward the closest building. He was still armed and could have shot at the guards, but he didn't want to leave a trail of blood behind him. How could he attempt to save the city on one hand, but kill everyone in his path on the other? He raced toward a brick two-story building, fearing he would take a bullet between the shoulder blades before he reached cover.

But the guards had fallen silent, neither yelling again nor shooting.

You're welcome.

Tolemek slowed and turned. The guards lay on the ground,

unmoving. Impossibly, his leather ball had rolled back to them, and vapors drifted up to kiss the soldiers' nostrils.

Thank you. Tolemek ran for the gate, hoping nobody on the walls was paying too much attention. Most of the men, little more than shadows visible through the snow, appeared to be clustered around the artillery weapons mounted at the corners of the installation, focused on the sky. Every now and then, one fired, though the airships were still hugging the north side of the harbor and staying over the water. Tolemek was surprised none of the ships were trying to bomb the city.

He nearly tripped as a realization struck him like a bullet. Standing in the middle of the street in front of a military installation full of enemy soldiers wasn't the place for realizations, but his feet wouldn't move until the gears in his mind finished spinning. The pirates knew. They knew that his canister had been placed and that it wouldn't be safe to come in and attack—and loot—until the toxin had been disseminated into the city. There was no way Goroth could have communicated with the incoming airships and accomplished all this after Tolemek had betrayed him. No, he had put this in motion from the beginning. At least as far back as the day before, when Tolemek and Cas had been hiding in those ducts, and Goroth had been wandering around, plotting and planning with the other captains. With Stone Heart.

Those men who had sneaked onto the freighter and attacked them? What if they had been trying to stop this madness? What if Tolemek had helped kill the only men on the outpost with consciences?

"Goroth planned to use my weapon on the city from the beginning," Tolemek whispered. The whole story about the fog machine being what would help the pirates take the city, it had been a lie, a ruse that Tolemek had believed. Fool.

Jaxi gave him a mental prod. *It doesn't matter now. Go.*

She was right. Tolemek shelved the thoughts for later consideration. He wiped snow out of his eyes and bent before the unconscious men, thinking he would have to pat them down and hope one had keys. The iron gate creaked open of its own accord. He slipped through without hesitating.

Thanks. He trusted Jaxi had handled that as well. *You're handy.*

An incalculable treasure.

And modest.

Yes. Now, take a right, then go up the street to the base of the tram. You'll have to figure out how to get that cabin down here to visit. I could do it, but the soldiers standing up there might notice and find it odd.

Tolemek ran past machine shops and warehouses built in the shadow of the butte. There weren't offices, barracks, or houses like at

the fort—this installation seemed to be dedicated to supporting the fliers. When he reached the shack squatting beside the landing pad at the bottom of the tram, Tolemek peeked inside, thinking an operator might be waiting. It was empty and dark. Whoever's job it was to move the cabin up and down had taken a break—or was, more likely, on the wall with the other soldiers, ready to defend his homeland.

Inside the shack, there was a simple control mechanism: two levers. He couldn't read the labels in the dark room and dared not light a lantern, but took a guess, pulling the one on the left toward him. He leaned through a window—there wasn't any glass, and he had to stick his head out and crane his neck to see to the top of the cliff. In calmer weather, and with less gunfire in the distance, he might have caught the creaking and clanking of the cabin if it were descending. He didn't hear or see anything. He tried the other lever.

It's moving. But there's a soldier in the shack up there. He noticed.

Is he alarmed?

No. He probably thinks his counterpart called it down. Though if it doesn't eventually come back up...

Understood.

Tolemek verified that the cabin was descending, battered by the wind and swaying like a puppet on a string. He bared his teeth in horror. If Goroth, or whatever peon he had sent, hadn't secured that canister well...

For the first time, it sank in that he could die that night. A victim of his own creation. Was that irony? There had been a time when he might not have cared, but he still had to find a solution to help his sister. And then there was Cas. He wasn't sure what there might be for them yet, but he didn't want to die before he could find out.

"Focus on this," he muttered and poked around in his bag. He pulled out his one and only tool from the middle of the canisters and vials. The multi-function device came from an Iskandian tinkering family famous for the tools, and he had thought it terribly clever when he had traded for it, but now, as he unfolded and held up the one-inch-long, cross-tip screwdriver, he had to fight down a wave of panic that threatened to wash over him. "I need finer tools for this, Jaxi," he whispered, envisioning the countdown timer and mechanism that protected the four glass ampoules inside. Their ability to kill thousands depended on detonation in the air, but if any one of them dropped out and broke at his feet, it would not only kill him but everyone downwind. He eyed the soldiers on the walls.

You might want to stop the tram before the cabin lands, so you can access the device.

Tolemek, a vision of the canister smashing down onto the landing pad, lunged for the control lever. A second later, he realized that the

cabin had probably gone up and down a few times since the detonator had been planted. The canister must be tucked under a beam or something that kept it from being pressed into the ground. Still, Jaxi was right. He needed access to it.

He leaned out of the shack and found the cabin swaying in the wind, its bottom a few feet off the ground. Swaying. Great, that would make his task even more fun.

"I don't suppose you can make the wind stop for a while?" he muttered.

Sorry, I never studied weather. The usually sarcastic Jaxi sounded contrite, even regretful. *Anyway, controlling nature is beyond the capability of all except the most powerful of sorcerers. There may not be anyone left in this time who can do it.*

With a look of disgust for the multi-function tool, Tolemek strode to the cabin. It would be worth hunting in one of the machine shops for finer tools, if there was time. He needed to check the clock first.

A good idea. As I said, the inside appears very intricate.

It is. An engineer friend had designed the vessel for him. He had the nickname of Precision for a reason.

Tolemek peered under the cabin, though the gloom made it difficult to see anything. He slid his hand along one of two support beams that crossed beneath the floor and found a familiar cylinder nestled against one. Even though he had expected it, his heart rate must have doubled or tripled at the irrefutable evidence.

"I'm going to have to risk a light," Tolemek said. And hope none of the soldiers on the wall found it strange that a man in a cloak was bent over under their tram cabin.

Take me out of my scabbard, and I'll provide it.

Somehow I suspect whatever light you emit will be even more suspicious to these soldiers.

I'll be incognito.

More because he was afraid he didn't have much time than anything else, he removed the sword from the scabbard and, since there was nowhere close by to lean it, thrust it into the packed earth beside the cement landing pad.

You better volunteer to clean and oil me later.

If I survive this, I'll do it in a most loving way.

Save the love for the girl. I just want to be clean.

A soft yellow glow that simulated lantern light arose from the blade. It was enough to make out the details of the cylinder, including the clock ticking down on the outside.

Tolemek closed his eyes and blew out a shaky breath. "There's not going to be time for tool shopping."

Less than eight minutes remained.

Chapter 16

Once the pirate outpost was nothing more than a carcass floating on the dark water below, Cas and the rest of Wolf Squadron flew in to help the others. With their giant base destroyed, she assumed the airships would give up and head back out to sea, but they lingered, their gunners pounding rounds toward the fliers swooping in and out of their scattered ranks.

"Strange that they're putting up this much of a fight," Zirkander said over the crystal.

"And not attacking the city," Blazer responded. "What do they win by shooting at us?"

"Besides our deaths?" Pimples asked.

"They might find our deaths satisfying, but that won't earn them any money or treasure."

"The colonel's head might," Pimples said. "I hear the bounty has gotten big in Cofahre."

"That true, Ahn?" Zirkander asked. "You see any wanted posters with my mug on them while you were held prisoner over there?"

"Papered on every tree, table, and tent post," Cas said, though she wasn't paying much attention to the banter. She had her next target picked out, a small airship that had moved into the harbor after the crash. She couldn't know its intent for certain, but there was no way she was letting them drop hooks to pull up the fliers—or their power crystals.

"Huh," Zirkander said. "Guess the Cofah are too cheap to pay for real wallpaper."

By then, Wolf Squadron had closed the distance to the remaining pirates, and everyone fell silent, concentrating on their work. Those manning defenses on the black airship saw Cas coming. It had a row of cannons bristling from the hull on either side, like in the nautical warships from generations past. She kept her eye on them as she swept upward to attack from above.

Wreckage floated in the harbor down below, some of it still aflame. Cas spotted a figure on a personal yacht, struggling to pull something —someone?—out of the water. One of the downed pilots? She

couldn't imagine anyone surviving that crash, but then again, she had survived *her* crash. Granted, she had pulled up the nose and skidded across the water instead of dropping straight into it, but she hoped whoever it was had made it.

Cas popped a few rounds into the balloon, being careful with her ammunition. She had already fired a lot of rounds, and there were numerous targets left floating in the sky. She got the incendiary bullet she wanted, and it pierced the dirigible, hydrogen going up in flame.

"Those new bullets are effective," she observed. Usually they just had to punch as many holes into the envelopes as possible, target the engines, or drop explosives.

"Yes," Zirkander said. "Enjoy it now. We just got some intel that the Cofah are coming up with countermeasures."

"They can't reinforce their balloons any further, or they'll be too heavy to achieve lift," Apex said.

"No more balloons. They've already launched a number of experimental craft akin to dragon fliers. Short-range, since they still don't have a fuel source equivalent to our power crystals, but they're building special ships to carry them to their destinations."

"That'll make things interesting," Blazer said.

"Something to worry about another day," said the Tiger Squadron leader. He and his men hadn't been vocal on the communication crystals much since their two fliers went down.

"Agreed," Zirkander said.

A few cannonballs whistled past Cas before the airship drifted downward, narrowly missing the yacht, but they weren't close enough to worry about. She climbed back up to join the others, only to realize that most of the airships had disappeared from the aerial battlefield. More had gone down in the harbor and the rest were finally retreating. Limping back out to sea.

"Let them go or give chase?" someone asked.

Zirkander hesitated a moment—he might be renowned for all of the aircraft he had taken down, but he wasn't a bloodthirsty man at heart. Still, pirates were pirates, most of them cutthroats as well as bandits, and Cas wasn't surprised when he said, "Take them down. We don't need them making repairs and harassing Iskandian ships another day."

"Yes, sir."

Fulfilling the orders didn't take long, though the storm made the flying a challenge regardless, as the snow was gusting sideways again, the clouds thicker than ever overhead. When they turned for home, she could barely see the city or the airbase. Landing was going to be tricky. Her shoulders had been bunched into knots for the last half hour, and the thought did nothing to relax them. She wondered if Tolemek was the kind of friend—or more than friend—who could be

convinced to give a girl a massage. Or would she even find him again when she landed? Maybe he had already gotten what he sought from Sardelle and was on his way out of the city, using the chaos to disappear before anyone noticed a criminal in their midst.

Cas found that thought depressing.

. . . . .

The snow had turned to hail. It was pelting the landing pad all around Tolemek's feet, and bouncing off his bare arms. The wind whipped his cloak about him like a flag on a pole. He kept waiting for someone to notice him—and the glowing sword. He had no idea what he would do when that happened. Seven minutes remained on the timer.

It wouldn't be easier to work on it inside the shack? On a table? Then I could glow in the shack, and it would be less obvious to onlookers.

"I'm trying to get it off," Tolemek said, his back twisted and bent awkwardly, so he could look up at the cylinder. "The morons nailed it —" he couldn't help but make a strangling noise at the idiocy, "—to the floor. They may have damaged some of the wiring inside. In fact, I'd be shocked if they hadn't. I have to be very, very careful." Thus far, between the screwdriver and the file pieces of his tool, he had managed little more than to pry the end open. "If I can get to the wiring that connects the clock, I should be able to stop the countdown. That's the most important thing."

You may want to stop talking aloud. Most of the pirate threat has been dealt with and the fliers are returning to the base. Some soldiers are coming down off the wall as well.

In other words, his odds of being caught had gone up. And Cas was on her way back to the base. To land right in time for his fatal invention to go off? He groaned. How could this night get worse?

"Watch out on base," someone shouted from the wall. "The gate guards were knocked out. Intruders inside."

"Sound the alarm!"

"That's how," Tolemek muttered. He tried to make his fingers work faster, but they were numb and clumsy from the cold. He had already dropped his tool twice.

Jaxi dimmed her light, probably trying to avoid notice, but that only made it harder for him to see. And he very much needed to see right now. The wire he needed to disconnect threaded through a nest of other wires and between two of the ampoules.

Nails or not, he was going to have to risk removing the canister. He needed better conditions for working on it—better conditions located in a place where the soldiers wouldn't spot him. Where he could find such a place in the next seven—no, damn it, six—minutes, he couldn't guess.

Holding his breath, he slid the first of the two nails free. The end of the canister drooped down, but nothing happened to the innards. And now for the second nail...

The tram cabin lurched.

Tolemek dropped his tool. “What are you—”

The operator up top is calling for the cabin.

“No, he can’t. Not now. That’ll be even worse. The pilots—”

But the cabin was already rising. Tolemek snatched up his tool, stuck it in his mouth, and leaped. He caught the edge of the cabin bottom with his fingers. For a moment, he stared at the cylinder, now dangling from a single nail and being battered by the wind. This would *not* end well.

He debated on grabbing it and simply trying to tear it the rest of the way free, but he dared not. For all he knew, that nail was snugged up against one of the ampoules, and jerking it to the side would break the glass.

Tendons straining, Tolemek pulled himself into the cabin by his fingers. He turned and flopped onto his belly, hanging halfway outside, hoping he could reach the canister. Now he could barely see it. The soft glow of the soulblade, still stuck in the dirt below, faded as the cabin rose, creaking and groaning on its cable. Not to mention that he had left Jaxi behind for any passerby to pick up.

Reason Number Two why nobody in your family will be trusted with a soulblade.

Tolemek pressed his feet into the sides of the cabin to brace his body, then folded himself in half, bending under the floor. He found the canister by touch, though without being able to see what he was doing, he was terrified he would detonate it. Or drop it. With the cabin being pulled toward the top of the cliff, the ground growing farther and farther away, it became a certainty that a drop would break the ampoules. Or maybe even detonate the dispersal mechanism. His father had once told him that men didn’t cry, but he was on the verge of tears of frustration.

You can do it. Also, Sardelle is coming.

I wish I knew how that could help me. Tolemek had levered the other nail out a millimeter or two, and he switched to the tool’s pliers. Keeping an iron grip on the canister with his free hand, he pulled at the nail, being careful not to wiggle it. Engines roared overhead as fliers landed on the top of the butte. *Can you stop this thing?* There was no time to try and explain to the soldiers up top what he was doing and that they had to let him continue.

The cabin lurched to a halt. Tolemek’s feet slipped an inch, and he almost lost his tool again.

Thanks. Hail beat at his face, and his leg muscles quivered from

holding up his weight. He pulled the nail out, letting it drop, and lowered the canister. Carefully, so very carefully, he eased it and himself back into the cabin.

I can't even see how much time is left on the clock. I need a light, Jaxi. Is there anyway—

Something blurred through the doorway, and a clank sounded on the floor beside him. Before he could guess what it was, the soulblade lit up, its glow a brighter yellow this time. He might have asked how she had levitated herself up here, but his eyes were riveted to the now-visible clock.

Sardelle is down there. She threw me.

Tolemek finished opening up the outer casing, but his shoulders were slumped. Two minutes. There wasn't time, and the fat tip of the screwdriver wouldn't work for the small, inner casing. He opened the knife blade. He would simply cut the wires holding the ampoules inside. If he lucked out and didn't trigger the bomb, maybe he could separate the poison from the detonator.

She says she'll teach your sister if we all survive this.

At another time, *any* other time, Tolemek would have found the news wonderful, but in his heart he knew there was no chance. Not enough time. Sweat dripped down his brow. His fingers kept moving, but they couldn't move fast enough, not with the clunky multi-tool.

He glanced at the sword. It seemed magic should have some kind of solution for this. Had science surpassed the old ways and become the more powerful? If only—

Tolemek froze. "Jaxi, pyrotechnics."

Yes...

Thinking of the explosion on the boat, he asked, "How hot of a fire can you make? And can it instantaneously be that hot? Or does it warm up slowly?"

No, I can burn something instantaneously. But the temperature? I don't know. I've never measured it.

"I need hot. The melting point of iron. Can you do that?"

Easy.

Tolemek lifted the canister, the wires and half-removed ampoules threatening to spill out like fish guts. "You're positive?"

There were only thirty seconds on the timer.

Yes. What do you want me to do?

"Burn these ampoules with as much heat as you can make."

That won't... release the toxin?

"Not at the melting point of iron. The gas will be vaporized. Hurry," he whispered, his eyes like cantaloupes as he watched the clock ticking down.

A strange tickle went through his mind. Jaxi reading his thoughts?

He hadn't sensed her before, but maybe she was tearing through his mind at some deeper level, making sure he wasn't lying. As if he would lie when he was fifteen seconds from dying too.

Can I just vaporize the whole thing?

"Yes!"

Throw it outside, so I won't burn you.

Tolemek would gladly take some burns if they succeeded, but he chucked the canister into the storm anyway. It disappeared into the snow and hail, at least to his eyes. Just throwing it from him wouldn't do anything to save him though. He needed...

"Now, Jaxi. *Please*."

A small flash of orange lit the sky for a moment, then disappeared. Tolemek held his breath, not that doing so would make an iota of difference if he had been wrong.

Well, Jaxi said after a moment, during which nothing happened and Tolemek's heart remembered to start beating again. *That was anticlimactic.*

Tolemek flopped back onto the floor and laughed. Magic trumped science after all.

The cabin lurched and started moving. His humor faded. He was about to be delivered to a pack of soldiers. After what he had just gone through, he supposed it didn't matter much.

Sardelle was in earnest when she promised to teach my sister?

Yes.

If I am unable to do so, will she find a way to extricate her from the sanitarium too?

A pause followed, Jaxi relaying the message perhaps. *Yes. Sardelle has been lonely for her own kind and had planned to seek out others with dragon blood, regardless. After this, she says she'll even teach you.*

Tolemek snorted. *What would she teach me? I don't have dragon blood.*

Jaxi snorted back—an impressive feat for a soul without lips or a nose. *Blood is hereditary, genius.*

But I never—

Please, you think science *accounts for all of the things you've made?*

Tolemek found himself gaping at the ceiling in stunned silence when the cabin clanged to a stop.

. . . . .

Cas had never appreciated the feel of pavement under her feet more than she did after climbing out of her flier. Her landing had been better than expected, with the wind easing up for her, though she had chewed on her nails, watching some of her comrades land. Lieutenant Solk had nearly gone over the edge of the plateau, with one wheel

hanging off when the craft came to a complete stop. Her face had been whiter than the snow around her when the ground crew had thrown cables around the craft, pulled it fully upright, and hauled her out of the cockpit.

Mishaps notwithstanding, everyone in Wolf Squadron had made it, though there would be drinking later to honor the fallen Tiger Squadron men. She had gotten the names. Both officers had been well-liked.

When Cas, walking beside Captain Blazer, Crash, and Apex, noticed a holdup at the top of the tram, she slowed down, a hint of unease returning to her stomach. Several people were leaning over the edge of the cliff and pointing downward. Had some airship slipped in to do some damage? Or... this couldn't have anything to do with Tolemek, could it? No, she had left him at the other installation, chatting with Zirkander's "archaeologist." Of course, Sardelle had made that appearance to deliver the communications devices. What if Tolemek was around too? Around where people might spot his Cofah skin and pirate garb?

"What's going on?" came the colonel's voice from behind them.

"Unknown, sir," Apex said.

Cas chewed on her lip. Zirkander fell into step beside her, and they soon joined the group.

"It's moving now." The tram operator waved an apologetic hand. "Not sure what the delay was, but it'll be up in a few seconds."

"Good," someone said. "There's drinking to do."

Cas would settle for a meal and a bunk with lots of warm blankets, though she did want to know what had become of Tolemek. She considered the colonel out of the corner of her eye. Sardelle hadn't seemed alarmed by the pirate, but she also hadn't seemed to know who he was. Zirkander would be a different matter. Even if Tolemek was hiding somewhere, Sardelle might have to do nothing more than describe him to the colonel for the recognition to kindle.

The tram cabin came into view over the edge of the cliff. The pilots, noticing Zirkander, stepped aside, offering to let him go first. Thus, since Cas was standing next to him, she had a clear view of the cabin interior when the operator opened the gate.

Tolemek sat on the floor, his arms draped over his knees, his cloak having fallen back to reveal his skin, his hair, and far too much of his face. A rather dazed face, as if he had been struck on the side of the head and was still trying to recover. A sword in a scabbard lay on the floor in front of his feet.

In the first second, Cas hoped nobody would recognize him. By the time the second second was upon them, no less than six people had their pistols out, including Zirkander.

“Wait,” Cas blurted, stepping forward. “That’s…” A retired pirate who isn’t a threat? A man not holding a weapon in his hands? Someone who looks like he needs a stiff shot of vodka? “That’s my prisoner,” she said.

“What?” Zirkander asked. He wasn’t the only one. But he was the only one who mattered, at least for the moment.

“Your *prisoner* is armed,” Crash said, waving to the sword.

Zirkander’s gaze followed that wave, locking onto the weapon. His face grew hard and unreadable as he looked back and forth from it to Tolemek. That wasn’t Sardelle’s soulblade or whatever it was called, was it? Surely he wouldn’t have stolen it, would he have?

Tolemek found her in the crowd, meeting her eyes. He didn’t say anything with so many people looking on, but he gave her a small smile and a shrug that seemed to say, “It’s a long story.”

“Yes,” Cas said, answering Crash’s objection, “because he gave me his parole. He turned on his own people to help me escape from the pirates. I didn’t make him any promises, in light of his past crimes, but I’d appreciate it if no one shot him full of holes until we figure out what’s going on.” She looked at the colonel as she said this, but his face hadn’t grown any more amiable. It was as hard and unfriendly as granite. An unusual expression for him. Cas had only seen it once before, when he had been defending her from that pompous, groping Cofah diplomat. Seeing it again now could not be a good thing.

Zirkander stalked into the cabin, his pistol still pointed at Tolemek, though Tolemek’s hands were clearly empty of weapons, and picked up the sword scabbard. “Get in, Ahn. I have to report to General Ort anyway. You can explain your story—and why you feel this murdering criminal shouldn’t be shot immediately—to him.”

In the minute it took the cabin to reach the base of the cliff? And here she had thought she had faced all of the tough challenges of the day already. She joined the two men inside, relieved when Zirkander didn’t invite anyone else in.

The gate clanged shut, and the cabin started descending. Cas opened her mouth, but she didn’t yet know what she intended to say. She wanted to ask what Tolemek was doing here, but at the same time, she wanted to try to explain everything to the colonel. If they took Tolemek to Ort, it would be all over. He would be in front of a firing squad by dawn, if not before. The colonel… he would be more reasonable. She hoped.

Before she got any words out, Zirkander grabbed Tolemek by his vest, hauled him to his feet, and shoved him against the metal wall. The cabin swayed and groaned.

“Sir,” Cas said, raising a hand, though she could barely see the men in the dark. The only lit lanterns were back on the butte and in the

compound at the base of the cliff.

"If you've done anything to Sardelle," Zirkander growled, "I'll shove you out that gate *right* now."

At a loss for anything intelligent to say, Cas went for the inane. "Colonel Zirkander, meet Tolemek, retired pirate. Tolemek, this is Colonel Zirkander."

"Yeah," Tolemek choked out, his airway restricted, "we've met in the air. He's almost killed me a couple of times."

A clang sounded—Tolemek being shoved against the wall again? "Sardelle," Zirkander repeated. "Where—"

"At the bottom of the tram, waiting for you. Or so the sword told me."

Cas stared at him. The *what* told him?

For a long moment, nothing sounded except the moaning of the wind and the creaking as the cabin swayed, descending slowly toward the bottom. Then Zirkander stepped back. They were the same height, Cas realized—a stupid thing to notice then, but as the gas lamps of the base approached from below, she could make out their silhouettes as they faced each other.

"We'll see what she has to say then," the colonel said, his voice softer now, though the warning hadn't disappeared from it. For Tolemek's sake, Cas hoped Sardelle would appear as soon as the men stepped out of the gate.

The cabin clanked down on the landing pad. An operator rushed over to open the gate.

"Welcome back, sir. Great flying up there. You, too, L.T."

"Thank you, Borscot," Zirkander said, though his gaze was roving all along the lighted area in front of the tram.

Cas scooted forward, trying to see around the men. There was no sign of—wait.

Sardelle stepped out of the shack, her cloak wrapped around her. "Ridge." She smiled, the expression full of genuine warmth. "Did the communication devices work?"

"Infallibly, but we have something to discuss."

Sardelle's smile turned dry as she nodded at Tolemek. "Yes, I imagine so."

"Sir, ma'am?" The soldier frowned at Tolemek, not knowing how to address him. "I need to send the cabin back up for the next group."

The colonel walked toward Sardelle. When she looked toward Tolemek again, he tossed her the sword scabbard. The tram operator jerked his arm up, looking like he meant to intercept the weapon, but it couldn't do much damage while sheathed. He seemed to realize that, too, and lowered his arm, though he gave Sardelle an odd look when she attached it to her belt and draped her cloak over it. Civilian

archaeologists probably weren't supposed to have swords on base.

Cas stepped out of the cabin with Tolemek and drew him to the opposite side from Sardelle and Zirkander. She dared not drag him far until there was a modicum of resolution with the colonel, but she didn't want everyone in the squadron coming over to interrogate him —or her—when they walked off the tram.

"Why do I have the feeling you two have had adventures?" she asked, deeming it a more tactful question than the what-by-all-the-gods-in-the-universe-are-you-*doing*-here one that was bubbling up inside of her.

"I hope you never know the details," Tolemek whispered, then surprised her by drawing her into a hug and burying his face in her neck.

Cas was beginning to think he'd had a worse night than she. "I hope you'll tell me a few of them at least. Or Zirkander if not me. I'm trying to figure out how to save you from General Ort and a firing squad."

"You smell like engine oil, guns, and leather," he said, sounding bemused—and not in the mood to worry about firing squads.

"Not the usual combination you get from women you spend time with?"

"No, but I like it."

His lips brushed up her neck, to her jaw, and then to her mouth. The kiss he gave her made her earlier one seem chaste and sweet; this one was heated with passion and more... the sort of relief and fire one felt after saving something invaluable that had almost been lost. Cas was breathless by the time he lifted his mouth from hers, and she couldn't remember where she was, what she was supposed to be doing, and why they weren't scurrying off to find a bunk to share.

"Lieutenant?" Zirkander asked from a few feet away.

Cas flushed, her cheeks so hot that she was sure she was melting snow for several meters in every direction. "Sir?"

A group of her fellow officers walked away from the tram cabin, chatting and trading shoves as they headed for the base gate. Fortunately, they didn't look over to Cas's shadows. She wasn't even sure if that was the first group that had departed. She didn't remember hearing the tram in operation. She touched her lips, blushing all over again. Tolemek stood at her back, his hand on her waist.

"I'm going to go talk to the general," Zirkander said. "You... find a rack. Get some rest. Or... whatever." He flicked his hand toward Tolemek. He didn't sound approving, but he wasn't threatening to kill her pirate, either. That was an amazing turn around.

"I wonder what Sardelle said," Cas mused as Zirkander walked

away.

"I don't know," Tolemek said, his arms wrapping around her waist, and his mouth returning to her throat, "but I vote for whatever."

Cas shivered and leaned back into him. "My vote… depends on whether you're taking those awful bracers off."

He chuckled softly. "I'll take off anything you like."

"Enticing."

"I certainly hope so."

Epilogue

Tolemek shifted his weight in the saddle, wincing at sore muscles. Pirates didn't spend a lot of time on horseback, and it didn't help that Zirkander had picked the biggest, orneriest horse in the stable for him. Tolemek had been thrown three times during the two-hour trip, which had caused the women to look at him with surprise and concern while Zirkander apologized heartily for the beast's temperament, then smirked into his scarf. Bastard.

At least they had turned off the road and, judging by Sardelle and Zirkander's enthused chatter, come to their destination. Given the revelation that the cabin was someplace Cas had once dreamed of being invited, Tolemek was expecting a bit more. A quarter mile down the path, the log structure perching next to the frozen lake and blanketed with six inches of snow, scarcely looked big enough for two people much less four people. Four people who barely knew each other and two of them men who might come to blows at any moment.

Five people.

Tolemek flinched, almost falling off the horse again. Jaxi hadn't spoken into his mind since the night of the attack, and he had assumed, with the emergency past, she was done communicating with him. *Are you actually considered a... people?*

I'm as much of a people as you are, Deathmaker. You're fortunate Sardelle has agreed to train you. Assuming you pass her tests this weekend and prove trainable at this point in your life. You're awfully old.

A centuries-old sword was calling him old? How bizarre. *Do you jump into Sardelle's head unannounced like this? Or am I special?*

You're definitely special, but, yes, Sardelle and I have no secrets. It's part of the joy of being bonded with a soulblade.

Maybe it was just as well that he had finagled magic lessons for his sister without acquiring an actual soulblade. Tolemek tried to imagine what it must be like having one's night of amorous passions interrupted by the commentary from a snarky sword. Then he decided he didn't want to imagine anyone having amorous passions with Zirkander and pushed the thought from his mind.

He's equally displeased by the idea of you having amorous passions with

his lieutenant, Jaxi put in brightly.

"You're looking thoughtful over there." Cas, who was riding beside him on a docile mare, gave him a smile.

"Am I?" Tolemek decided not to mention the conversation. When he had alluded to the fact that Jaxi not only had a name but could communicate with people, her face had assumed that expression it did when magic was mentioned, a mixture of disbelief and horror.

"Apex would call it dyspeptic. That's one of his words. He usually reserves it for General Ort."

In the week since the pirates had been turned away, Tolemek hadn't met many of her pilot friends. He hadn't been allowed to wander the city and meet many people at all, but he couldn't complain overmuch, nor did he consider himself dyspeptic about anything except having a sarcastic sword sauntering through his thoughts. He had expected the firing squad, but instead, thanks to Zirkander's influence, he had been invited to stay in the city and had been given the full use of an immaculate laboratory that was technologically superior to anything he had ever seen. Indeed, he had spent far more time playing with the fancy centrifuge than was dignified for someone of his age and expertise. Until Cas had walked in and caught him at it. She hadn't seemed to believe he was doing "important experiments to further your people's war efforts," either. But then he had given her the tour, including the compact living quarters that had come with his lab, and they had grown delightfully distracted. For quite some time. He still grinned at the memory—and the realization that she *liked* being distracted with him. He hadn't caught her giving Zirkander so much as a thoughtful gaze in the time they had been together, so Tolemek was beginning to believe that any feelings for her commander that Cas had admitted to under the truth serum had been replaced by feelings for him, or perhaps her confession had been nothing more than a tale of a fleeting infatuation to start with.

He would have left the pirates years ago if he had known he could have such a life here. Granted, his lab assistant was obviously a spy, soldiers followed him whenever he left the building, and the Iskandians hadn't been subtle in stating that they expected their new scientist to make them useful things. But it was far more than he had expected. They might loathe him for his past, but they wanted his talents for their future. He hadn't foreseen that. They had even wanted him when he'd said he was out of the weapons, poisons, and biological-agents creation business—both on principle and because he didn't detest his homeland to the point where he wanted to harm its inhabitants. The general overseeing him had been delighted at the demonstration Tolemek had given him of Healing Salve Number Six.

He had promptly ordered five hundred ounces worth, and, yes, Tolemek could have more lab assistants if he needed help fulfilling the order. It was a good beginning.

"I'm actually rather contented with the situation and the good company." Tolemek smiled at Cas, so she could make no mistake as to whom he meant. "I'll be even more contented when I figure out a way to get my sister over here. My understanding is that I'm to be treated well, produce lots of militarily significant formulas, and never leave the continent, especially not to go back to Cofahre where I might be tempted to blab Iskandian secrets."

"That's your understanding, or that's exactly what some general said?" Cas asked.

"Actually the general was more blunt than I. And I gathered he was paraphrasing your king. Who was even blunter."

"Ah. Well, in a few years, when you've proven yourself, they might allow you some travel privileges. After all, it's barely been a week, and you're already being permitted to see the country." Cas stretched an open palm toward the small and extremely rustic cabin.

Tolemek kept himself from pointing out that it was only because two trusted officers were escorting him that he had been allowed this excursion out into the world. He also kept himself from suggesting that being in a tiny cabin wasn't exactly seeing the country, not when its owner was in earshot. Besides, Cas looked tickled to be out here. With him. Tolemek smiled at her again. "This is true."

"And I'm sure we can find a way to retrieve your sister. Even if *you* can't leave, you have friends here now."

Zirkander had dismounted, and his eyebrows twitched at this statement. Sardelle smiled back at them with more enthusiasm.

"I have some ideas for getting her over here," she said. "We can discuss them this weekend."

"We're here to relax," Zirkander said. "Not discuss work." He looked at Tolemek again. "Or schemes."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ridge. This is the one place I feel I can speak openly. On your base, your houses are so close together that I'm scared I'll slip up and alert some nosey neighbor that I'm more than an archaeologist."

"Are you truly accusing Lieutenant Colonel Ostraker of being nosey? He's the most proper example of a military officer you'll ever find. He's far too busy ironing his uniforms and polishing his boots to wander over and peep through our windows."

"His grandmother isn't," Sardelle said, dismounting near the cabin's small porch. "Not only is she so old that she was probably alive when I was walking the continent the first time, but she's always over in your yard, trimming your shrubs and filling your bird feeder."

Tolemek hadn't quite gotten the story on where Sardelle had come from, but for whatever reason, she didn't seem to worry about keeping her secrets around him or Cas. Maybe because they had already suspected her of being a sorceress when they showed up on her doorstep.

"Well, the shrubs shouldn't need trimming now that the snows have come." Zirkander rubbed his jaw and took the reins to Sardelle's horse. "But the birds do enjoy their suet in the winter."

She dropped her hand to his forearm. She managed to look sweet, earnest, and determined all at the same time. "We must have a discussion. And some planning. That's what I'd like to do while we're here. We have to convince your people that magic can be useful, perhaps to finally free this continent from its would-be oppressors. Those communication devices are a start, even if your people don't know they were made a week ago and not centuries in the past, and they gave me an idea about perhaps making a few more indispensable items for the military and then letting the news slip that they're magical."

"I'm willing to discuss those things," Zirkander said as he led their two horses back to a lean-to against the back of the cabin that was out of the wind. "So long as it's in a relaxed state."

"Besides," Sardelle went on. "It's more than wishful thinking that has me bringing this up. The pilot I healed, the one who crashed..."

"The one who would have died without your intervention?" Zirkander returned from the back and pulled her into a hug, burying his face against her fur cap for a moment.

"Yes," she said, her voice quieter. "He said something... I tried to disabuse him of the notion, but he was quite convinced that he had been the beneficiary of a miracle and that I had the powers of a goddess. His words, mind you."

Zirkander frowned thoughtfully.

Tolemek was considering how to dismount from his beastly horse while this conversation was going on. For the moment, it was standing quietly, but he swore it was watching him out of the corner of its eye.

"Perhaps nothing will come from it," Sardelle went on, "but perhaps I may not have the luxury of remaining incognito for long. Things may get more complicated."

"No," Zirkander said. "This is my cabin in the woods. Things don't get more complicated at my cabin in the woods. It doesn't work that way. It just doesn't." He sounded like he knew he was being petulant —maybe he was intentionally being petulant to make a point—and sighed in the end, releasing Sardelle. "We'll think of something." He smiled and touched her face. "*After* our relaxing weekend together. This cabin is for enjoying the wilderness and appreciating the quiet

time away from the city. That's what this cabin is for. Fishing. Hunting. Star gazing. Long walks with a loved one..."

Sardelle considered the frozen lake and the snowy branches of the trees. "It's cold for such activities, don't you think?"

"Snuggling by a fire with a loved one is also an acceptable form of relaxation." Zirkander gave Sardelle an eyebrow wriggle and a leer.

"Excellent. Snuggling is the perfect time to discuss agendas."

The leer turned into an exasperated sigh, though his eyes held a share of humor.

"I think you were right," Cas whispered to Tolemek. "She does control him. Not magically perhaps..."

"Does that mean you don't believe there will be much relaxing this weekend?" Tolemek replied.

Cas was dismounting, so he decided he had better do so too. He threw his leg over his horse, and it chose that moment to shake the snow off its fur. Vigorously. Its timing was precise. Tolemek lost his balance and ended up on his backside again.

Zirkander grabbed the reins. "No horses in Cofahre?" he asked mildly.

Tolemek glowered as he pushed himself to his feet, noting that Cas had dismounted without trouble. "No horses that have been trained by enemy commanders to torment new allies, no."

"Huh. Odd country." Zirkander took Cas's reins as well and led the two horses back to join the others.

At least he wasn't the sort to foist chores on someone else. Tolemek had wondered if Cas, as lowest ranking military person present, might be turned into an errand girl.

"You should try to get him to like you," Cas whispered, dusting snow off Tolemek's clothing.

"What if I don't like him?"

"You only feel that way because he's treating you like an enemy right now. If he starts to like you, he'll be roguishly charming instead of devilishly disagreeable."

The idea of Zirkander using roguish charm on him was more alarming than the notion of a firing squad. Cas was beaming up at him with hopeful eyes though. Ugh, speaking of women being in control...

"Any suggestions for how I might accomplish this?"

"Perhaps you could challenge him to a snowball fight."

"As if we were ten-year-old boys?" Tolemek asked.

"He's known to have a playful side."

"Not by the Cofah."

"That's because they insist on chucking grenades and cannonballs at him instead of snowballs," Cas said.

"I doubt there's anything they *haven't* tried throwing at him at this

point."

Cas scooped up a big handful of snow and packed it into a ball.

"Are you volunteering to be on my team if a snowball battle should break out?" Tolemek imagined he could take anything Zirkander and his sorceress could hurl his way if he had Cas's arm at his side. And he wouldn't actually mind smacking Zirkander in the face with a heavy pile of snow. Having the other man shove him up against the wall in that tram cabin had rankled, but Tolemek hadn't dared defend himself then. He had been so exhausted that he probably couldn't have even if he tried.

"Not exactly."

As soon as Cas grinned, he knew he was in trouble. Up on the split-log deck, Zirkander was in the process of unlocking the door and holding it open for Sardelle, leaving his back to Tolemek. And Cas. She threw the snowball with the speed and accuracy of a sniper's daughter. It smacked Zirkander in the back of the neck and exploded. It would be shocking if icy chunks of snow didn't make their way down his shirt.

When Zirkander spun around, Cas, still smiling, pointed at Tolemek.

"What?" Tolemek blurted, stunned by this betrayal. Thus, he wasn't prepared when a cannonball-sized snow missile was launched at him.

He tried to dodge, but it caught him in the shoulder, spattering his face with slush. Tolemek wasn't close to the cabin, the trees, or any conveniently placed cover to hide behind, so he did the only thing that made sense. He snatched up a wad of snow, hurrying to pack it into a ball. But he paused with it held aloft. Who to hit? Zirkander, for striking him? Or Cas for *causing* Zirkander to strike him?

In that second while he was deciding, two snowballs slammed into him from different directions. Betrayed—on all accounts. He spun, hurling his weapon in the direction of the deck. He should have checked first. Sardelle had climbed the steps, apparently to usher Zirkander inside and stop this silliness. Tolemek's snowball exploded against her arm. Her expression wasn't so much angry as startled. As if she couldn't believe that he had dared strike her—well, actually he hadn't dared... He'd misfired.

At first, Zirkander looked like he meant to leap over the railing and pummel Tolemek for targeting his lady, but she caught his arm, whispered something, then plopped a snowball into his hand.

"Oh?" he asked, then launched it.

Tolemek would have dodged, but he was busy gaping because the snowball grew in size as it sailed toward him. It wasn't an illusion. It was bigger than his head by the time it slammed into his chest. Fortunately, it spattered into a slushy mess without hurting him, but it

did cause him to step back to brace himself. That was the intent, anyway. Unfortunately, his heel slipped on something hidden beneath the snow, and he landed on his back in the white fluff.

"You're right," came Zirkander's voice from the deck. "That *was* more satisfying."

Cas snickered. Loudly. Tolemek hadn't heard her laugh often, so he supposed this was worth it, so long as she decided to give tender attentions to his grave injuries later on.

She appeared over him, her impish face framed by the cloudy sky. She had another snowball in hand—how *did* she make the things so quickly?—but didn't throw it, perhaps considering a downed man an unworthy target. "It's a good thing you can make potions, because I don't think the Iskandian army would accept you based on your fighting prowess."

Tolemek decided the proper reply to such mocking was to grab her ankle and pull her off her feet. She squawked a startled curse. She might have fallen into the cold snow beside him—surely a suitable punishment—but he tugged her so she landed atop him instead. He wasn't sure if he wanted to use her for a shield, keep her from tossing more snowballs at him, or employ the maneuver to encourage the pressing of her body parts against his body parts. "One would hope that Iskandian army recruits are taught to assist their comrades in battle rather than to set them up for enemy assaults."

"You obviously haven't been along on any academy combat drills." Cas still had her snowball in hand—alarming—but rested her chin against his chest instead of pulling away or mashing it into his face. That was promising.

"Lieutenant Ahn?" Zirkander called from the deck. "Is that dastardly pirate using you for a shield? Or are you canoodling?"

Cas turned her head over her shoulder to respond with another grin. "Yes, sir."

Encouraged, Tolemek readjusted her so that her face was in line for a kiss. He was vaguely aware of Zirkander and Sardelle going into the cabin and shutting the door.

Sardelle has announced that your training will not begin until the morning.

Tolemek managed to receive this mental intrusion without being overly distracted from his physical activities. Or perhaps he was too focused on those to care about the comment.

Just relaying information. Also, I suggest you don't enter the cabin for a while. Jaxi did the soulblade equivalent of sighing. *Humans. As randy as bonobos.*

"Looks like we'll be stuck out here for a while," Tolemek murmured, not moving his lips far from Cas's lips, though he managed

to tilt his head toward the closed cabin door.

"You better keep me warm then."

"I can do that."

THE END

Blood Charged

Sardelle Terushan, sorceress and healer, should be lying low. Magic is forbidden in Iskandia, and magic users are drowned, shot, or otherwise slain. The problem? She's fallen in love with ace fighter pilot and national hero, Colonel Ridge Zirkander, a man whom everybody notices, including the king. It's not long before Sardelle has spies dogging her steps and people trying to blow her up. Worse, her presence is jeopardizing Ridge's career. If she can't find a solution to the nation's centuries-old hatred of magic, the only way to protect Ridge—and herself—may be to leave.

Ridge Zirkander isn't used to worrying about more than shooting down Cofah airships and keeping the officers in his squadron alive, but his world has gotten more complicated since giving his heart to Sardelle. It's difficult to keep people from noticing a mysterious and enigmatic woman, not to mention her chatty sentient sword. He's been passing her off as an archaeologist to his fellow pilots, but when the king calls him in to a private meeting, Ridge fears his secret has been discovered.

But the king—and the rest of the country—has a greater problem. Cofah military scientists have acquired something that shouldn't exist in the world any longer: dragon blood. In addition to having countless mysterious properties, it's a powerful energy source that can be used to create devastating weapons. Ridge, Sardelle, and their allies must travel to the empire as part of a secret strike force to steal the dragon blood. If they fail, the Cofah will finally have the power to destroy all of Iskandia.

Chapter 1

Sardelle was being followed.

She hadn't seen her pursuer yet, but her sorceress's senses told her a woman was back there, skulking through the slushy alleys of Pinoth. Her senses also told her the woman was armed. The large hunting knife hanging from her belt shouldn't prove too much of a threat, but the six-shooter nestled in her palm? If prepared, Sardelle could shield herself from bullets, but doing so in the middle of the magic-fearing Iskandian capital with dozens of witnesses around… even if she wasn't physically harmed, she would be in trouble.

Sardelle quickened her step.

You should have brought me with you, Jaxi, her sentient soulblade, spoke into her mind.

As I've pointed out several times, women wandering around with swords are an oddity in this age. For the first couple of weeks she had been in the city, Sardelle had worn Jaxi beneath her cloak, in part because she hadn't wanted to risk losing her after working so hard to retrieve her from that mine, and in part because she hadn't realized how much fashions had changed during the three hundred years she had slept in that mage stasis chamber. Soldiers still carried swords as part of their uniform, but firearms were the norm, and women who worried about defending themselves on the streets preferred pistols they could slip into their handbags. Thanks to her relationship with the most famous pilot in the city, if not in all of Iskandia, there were already enough rumors floating around about her. She didn't need to draw extra attention by not fitting in with the locals. Fortunately, without the soulblade, she looked no different than any other Iskandian woman, dark hair, pale skin, a few freckles across the nose…

And the ability to flambé hordes of enemy soldiers with a wave of your hand.

Sardelle snorted. *Pyrotechnics are* your *specialty.*

Yes, and I'm quite fabulous at them. After a pause, Jaxi added, *Your shadow has taken to the rooftops to keep up with you without being noticed. Her finger is tight on that trigger too.*

I know.

You could hop onto the roof, pin her down, cut off her air for a while so she knows you're serious, then demand to know why she's following you.

Unless you're suggesting I impose upon her physically to do all those things, I would be confirming something she can only suspect at this point.

Physical imposition is perfectly acceptable, but from the way she's hopping from rooftop to rooftop, she may be more than your match in that area.

Sardelle thought about pointing out that she had hopped a few rooftops in her day, but Jaxi was fully aware of her abilities… and weaknesses.

You tripped and skinned your knee the last time you hopped a log.

Thanks for the reminder. Sardelle turned down a side street, hoping her spy would be slowed down by having to cross the wide boulevard before skimming up to another rooftop. A sudden hope kindled. *She's not Cofah, is she?*

Pale skin. She looks like a native.

Sardelle sighed. She would have worried less if a spy from the empire verified her secrets. Nobody here would listen to a Cofah woman's accusations against her.

A steam wagon mounted with large guns trundled down the street, clattering and clanking across timeworn cobblestones. The cargo area in the back was covered. On impulse, Sardelle jumped onto the back and clung to a bar at the corner.

Very nice. You didn't even skin a knee.

Ignoring Jaxi, Sardelle watched over her shoulder, hoping she would spot her follower stuck up on a rooftop and quickly falling behind. The woman didn't show herself.

The steam wagon belched stinky black smoke into the air, and the bumps and shudders from driving on the cobblestones made Sardelle's teeth clatter together, but it moved along at a faster speed than she could walk. They cruised past shoppers, workers, and bicycle messengers braving the slushy streets and fearlessly weaving past steam vehicles, horses, and donkeys pulling carts. The miles-long harbor came into view, a mixture of fishing vessels, freighters, and warships on maneuvers out in the water. Sardelle's gaze drifted to the butte towering at the south end. From the ground, she couldn't see much of the airbase, but she had been up there enough times to imagine the runways and its hangars full of mechanical dragon fliers. The sky over the sea was clear, the wind stiller than usual. Maybe the pilots would have practice maneuvers scheduled for the day.

Isn't your doting lover going to a meeting this morning?

Ah, that was right. Ridge wouldn't be out there, even if the fliers did take to the sky. Not unless an alarm sounded, and his whole squadron was called to duty.

Your spy is falling behind, but still following. She may know where you're going.

Unfortunately, that was a possibility. This was Sardelle's third day heading to the public archives building for research. Maybe another visitor had noticed her there yesterday and thought her suspicious, or maybe the woman who worked at the assistance desk had reported to someone about Sardelle's unflagging interest in the place—judging by the dust smothering the shelves, very few had even passing interest in the archives building.

I'm not going to turn around and go back to Ridge's cottage to weep quietly over my lost friends, family, and life while waiting for him to come home for the night. Sardelle had done enough of that during her first weeks in town. True, she had been working on those communications devices for Ridge's squadron more often than she had been mourning —sulking, Jaxi had called it—so it hadn't been wasted time, but she was eager to make headway on the mission she had given herself: to track down her kin, however many generations removed, and search for other Iskandians with dragon blood. Then she would teach those who were willing how to use their powers. It would be the mission of a lifetime, and finding those people wouldn't be easy, not when anyone with inexplicable talents learned to hide them early on. The archives building was the only place in town that might tell her if her brother or any of her cousins had survived the purging of the Referatu and had children who had kept the line alive through the centuries. She particularly wanted to find her brother's descendants, to make sure they were well. He had teased and tormented her relentlessly all through childhood, and she had rarely visited him in adulthood, but now that it was too late… a lump of regret formed in her throat whenever she thought about it.

I wasn't suggesting you abandon your quest or fill your days with knitting scarves like the old woman next door, but you could come home to get me, so you'd be better able to defend yourself.

I can defend myself fine on my own.

I never would have chosen to bond with you if I'd known you would leave me under the bed for days on end with nothing for company but dust balls.

I'm quite positive there are no dust balls under Ridge's bed. The wagon turned off the main street. When a bicycle wobbled into its path, forcing it to slow down, Sardelle hopped off. *Besides, a couple of days of inaction should be nothing after three hundred years of being cooped up inside a mountain. It's scarcely been three weeks since you had that big adventure with Tolemek.*

You mean the big adventure where he used me as a lamp, because I can glow nicely?

You also incinerated a deadly weapon that was seconds away from killing thousands of people. Something Sardelle wished Jaxi had figured out she could do *before* Sardelle had promised to help rescue Tolemek's sister from some sanitarium an ocean and thousands of miles away and to teach her how to use magic.

Fussy, fussy. I thought you wanted *new students.*

I do, but it would be more feasible to look for them here. Maybe it was selfish, but Sardelle was more interested in teaching her own people than someone who came from the continent that had been trying to conquer Iskandia for centuries. Nor was she positive Tolemek's sister, reputedly disturbed in the mind, would be teachable.

She hiked up her skirt and walked up a side street full of melting snow and steaming horse piles, glad her fur-lined boots kept *most* of the road decor away from her legs. Her destination, a drab gray three-story building looming at the next intersection, had the architectural allure of a doorstop. The usual woman was sitting behind the desk, reading a book and scowling at people who left puddles of water on the threshold floor. She also had the allure of a doorstop.

"You again?" the archivist asked when Sardelle walked in, then glanced toward the door, as if she expected someone else to come in behind her. Interesting.

"Yes, I believe this will be my last day of research." Sardelle signed her name in the register at the desk, using the same made-up surname she had been using since waking up in this new era, Sordenta. Only two people had signed in after her yesterday, and she was the first visitor today.

"You going to be looking in the red books again?"

Sardelle paused, the pen still on the page. "Pardon?"

"I have to report that, you know."

Sardelle thought back to the previous two days. She had looked into archive books with red bindings, but she hadn't thought anything of the colors. Others were black, blue, and green, seemingly arranged on the shelves at random.

"I didn't know. What does the red signify?" she asked, though a feeling of unease settled about her shoulders like a cold, wet cloak.

The clerk's eyes narrowed to slits. "Ancestral lines with witch blood."

It took her a moment to do so, but Sardelle hooked two fingers before her chest in a warding-off gesture, having learned this was the appropriate sign one should make when magic or witches were discussed. "I had no idea."

She had been aware of the clerk ambling around the building from time to time, pretending to dust and to arrange books, but she hadn't realized the woman had been spying on Sardelle's research material.

Or that a genealogy book could be so condemning, to the one reading it *and* the ones listed in it. Were the descendants of known sorcerers from centuries past monitored to this day? Or were they simply listed in these archives in case the names came to the attention of the law? The archivist would have known, but Sardelle dared not ask her further questions on the matter.

The woman was still squinting suspiciously. “No? Most people who come here are looking for information on their ancestors. But some are also hoping to contact descendants of witches for nefarious reasons.”

“I was simply researching lines I found mentioned in historical texts that are related to the Referatu,” Sardelle said, “because there’s been a renewed military interest in the artifacts from that culture.”

“You don’t look military.” The woman frowned at her dress.

Maybe you should have brought a sword.

Hush.

“I don’t believe the military is interested in witches, either,” the archivist added.

“Not the magic users specifically, but some of the artifacts that civilization once left behind.” Technically true. The Referatu light fixtures were now powering Iskandian fliers, not that anyone had seemed to know that’s what the power sources had originally been.

“People’s names are listed here, not artifacts.”

“I understand that, but I may gather a few leads here.” Why was she explaining herself to this woman when she had such a poor history of lying convincingly? “Unless you intend to stop me from doing so, I shall continue to do my research.” Sardelle raised an eyebrow, almost hoping the woman would pester her further and give her a reason to deliver an unseemly rash.

Don’t start with that again. That’s almost as suspicious as deflecting bullets in public spaces.

I hardly think that’s true.

It got you in trouble last time.

That was, alas, true, but it had been more the discovery of her picture in that book that had sealed the condemnation.

“It’s not my job to stop you from researching,” the woman said and waved for Sardelle to continue into the building.

No, she’ll just report what you’re researching to someone dastardly.

That’s the impression I’m getting. Sardelle headed into the library-like room, turning down an aisle to escape the woman’s view. *Let me know if my rooftop pursuer comes in the door, will you?*

I’ll consider it if you agree to take me out next time you go. I like to feel the warmth of the sun on my pommel.

Agreed.

Sardelle headed for a narrow hallway in the back of the building. She hadn't discovered it, and the stairs at the end that led to a basement, until the archives had been on the verge of closing the day before. There were a lot of red-bound books down there. She took the stairs three at a time, having the sense that she should finish her research today; someone more intimidating than the archivist might be waiting for her if she showed up again tomorrow.

She grabbed the knob and almost smashed her face on the door when it didn't open. It hadn't been locked yesterday…

It didn't need to be locked until you showed up with an interest in the contents.

What is this? Some way to trap innocent people who are simply intrigued by genealogy? Sardelle could bypass the lock without much effort, but she felt affronted anew at this small betrayal. Maybe because there had been so many betrayals already. Learning about the demise of everyone she had ever known and loved had been difficult enough to grasp, but knowing her own people—Iskandian soldiers—had been responsible for the purge, as they called it… The Referatu had worked side-by-side with the military for generations, helping defend the continent from invaders. The only thing that made it possible for her to look at those around her as normal human beings and not mortal enemies was that this genocide had been three hundred years in the past for everyone alive on the continent today. Or so she had thought.

Sorcerous genealogy, yes. For once, Jaxi sounded more grim than sarcastic. The Referatu had been her people too. Even if she had lived and died centuries before bonding with Sardelle, she'd had friends from that era, too, sorcerers and other soulblades. *I could peruse the contents if you don't want to go in.*

There were several thousand books in there.

I read the entire prison library at the Magroth Mines.

That was fifty books. And you had three hundred years.

There were at least sixty books. Jaxi sniffed. *And they were only there for the last fifty years, thank you very much.*

It'll be faster for me to look in person, but thank you for the offer. Having Jaxi do the research from the safety of Ridge's house *would* keep Sardelle from going out in public, but it was a lot more efficient to be here, looking at titles—and red covers—in person. And this was her quest, not Jaxi's. The names of Sardelle's relatives wouldn't mean anything to someone who had been born centuries before.

She used air pressure like a key to push the lock pins above the sheer line, then opened the door. She stepped into a dark, musty room and made sure she didn't sense anyone else in there before she shut herself in. Pitch blackness surrounded her. She thought about simply

making a mage light, but there were lanterns with oil hanging by the door. She produced a spark of flame, lit one, and carried it with her into the room. Her footprints from the day before were visible in the dust on the stone floor, along with another set that hadn't been there when she had left. They weren't much bigger than hers, and she guessed they belonged to the archivist.

Sardelle took her notepad out of her pack and selected a few registers with names and addresses from families in towns in the Ice Blades. Of course, there was nothing anywhere about Galmok Mountain, the subterranean fortress where she had trained and where so many Referatu had lived and worked when the stronghold was destroyed. But people didn't move to the mountain until they were identified as gifted. She had grown up in—

Problem, Jaxi chimed in her mind.

Someone coming? Sardelle looked toward the door and listened for footsteps.

Someone is peeking through the windows here.

At Ridge's house?

Unless you left me under a bed in someone else's house, yes.

Is it Lieutenant Colonel Ostraker's grandmother again? Sardelle referred to their usual snoop, a woman who liked to do favors for Ridge and who wasn't above peeping into his windows while trimming the hedges.

No. Two women in green cloaks with the hoods pulled low. They're skulking around in the backyard. With more alacrity than the ninety-year-old woman next door.

Maybe leaving Jaxi at the house had been a mistake after all. She could keep herself from being stolen, in a deadly manner if she wished, but it would be condemning if a magical sword were found at Ridge's house. Not just to Sardelle, but to Ridge, as well. She didn't have a lot left to lose, but he could lose his career, his reputation, and all of his comrades if it came out that he was sleeping with a sorceress. *Knowingly* sleeping with a sorceress. Not for the first time, she wondered if it was selfish of her to stay here, to risk everything he had worked for over the years because she cared for him—maybe even loved him—and enjoyed being around him.

One just took out lock picks and is heading for the back door. I'll see if I can keep them from noticing me. In case the dust ball camouflage fails.

There are *no dust balls*, Sardelle thought reflexively, but she was more worried about the intruders. Should she run home to deal with them? When this might be her last chance to access these archives? What would she do even if she arrived and the intruders were still there? Confront them?

Fine, but I do find this collection of beer steins from around the

continent somewhat alarming in its thoroughness.

At least Jaxi didn't sound that worried about the intruders. Meanwhile, Sardelle was once again reconsidering her decision to come to the city with Ridge instead of staying in his cabin by that nice little lake. Just because she couldn't do any research there or get on with her life in any way…

I thought it was your unwillingness to give up the long nights of bed bouncing with your soul snozzle that prompted the move.

Not… entirely.

They've opened the back door.

Sardelle tried to remember if she had engaged her booby traps that morning after Ridge had left. She thought she had, but after several days without trouble, she might have grown lax.

Are they—

A creak on the steps outside her door interrupted her thoughts. Sardelle swept out with her senses. Yes, someone was walking down the stairs. The archivist. Sardelle lowered the lantern to the tiniest of flames. She didn't think the light was bright enough to been seen beneath the door crack, but no need to take chances.

The doorknob rattled. She hoped the woman would assume nobody was inside since Sardelle had relocked it, but she doubtlessly had the key. If she decided to come in and check…

The steps creaked again. Sardelle let out a slow breath. The woman was going away.

What's your status, Jaxi? She grabbed the most promising registers and stuffed them into her satchel. She was going to have to borrow them, whether that was permissible or not. She would find a way to return them later.

You know that large copper soup pot?

Yes…

It fell on the head of one of the intruders.

That's impressive considering the pot rack is over the stove and not the walkway through the kitchen.

Yes, isn't it?

Sardelle started for the door but paused next to a bin of large rolled scrolls, each one at least three feet wide. She hadn't investigated those yesterday and wondered if they might be graphical representations of lines. Three of them had edges that had been dipped in red dye. She grabbed them for a quick look. The scrolls wouldn't fit in her satchel, but on the off chance they held something important, she didn't want to abandon them without a glance. As she unrolled the first, it occurred to her that if she had known about the red-for-evil-witchiness categorizing system, she could have limited her search to those records to start with.

"Lesson learned…"

She sucked in an excited breath when she spotted a familiar surname at the top of the first scroll. Maricoshin. That family had founded Referatu and had claimed numerous powerful sorcerers even by the standards of Sardelle's day. She was taking these scrolls with her whether they fit in her satchel or not. She would simply sneak past the archivist on the way out…

A click sounded in the corner of the room near the door.

Before Sardelle could do more than wonder what it might be, orange light flashed, and a cacophony of noise roared in her ears. A wave of power slammed into her, hurling her from her feet. She crashed into a wall of books, and pain pummeled her body from all sides. Her lantern disappeared beneath falling furnishings—or maybe breaking beams and a falling ceiling.

Blackness swallowed the room.

. . . . .

Colonel Ridgewalker Zirkander ambled through the courtyard of Harborgard Castle, giving cheerful nods and smiles to the dour-faced soldiers stationed next to the doors to the various towers, halls, and dormitories that opened up off the main driveway. Most stared stonily forward, refusing to acknowledge him—there was some rule on the books about castle guards not interacting with anyone, except to skewer intruders with swords—though a few offered quick grins and abbreviated waves when they thought none of their stolid brethren were looking.

The dourest of the dour stood in front of the grand marble doors leading to the king's audience chamber. They were open, letting in the sunlight—a welcome change from the rain and snow of the past three weeks—but one had to pass the guard's scrutiny before entering, or so the rifle crooked in the man's arms implied. The weapon was one of the few modern inventions on open display within the castle walls. A steam-powered crane sitting next to scaffolding erected against one of the towers marked another exception. The castle had survived nearly a millennium and was considered a Super Important Historical Landmark, meaning about seven hundred people on a dysfunctional committee had to approve architectural additions and changes. It had taken twenty years for them to decide to fix the holes in that tower after the last castle bombing. Fortunately for the castle—and the committee—attacks on the capital had been rare since the dragon flier base had been built above the harbor.

The dour door guard knew who Ridge was and knew the king was expecting him, but he lowered his rifle and opened his mouth to start the familiar state-your-name-and-your-business-and-whether-you-

swear-undying-fealty-to-the-king-and-Iskandia preamble that all guests had to endure.

"You forgot to button yourself in," Ridge said, pointing to the man's crotch.

The guard blinked and looked down. It only took him a second to see that it had been a joke, but by then, Ridge had slipped inside, avoiding the spiel. He caught Mister Dour's sigh at the same time as a familiar gray-haired man stepped out of the alcove by the entryway and held up a hand. His dress uniform was immaculate, the creases in his trousers pressed to rigid crispness, and his boots polished so brightly one could shave in the reflection. Neat rows of medals and ribbons lined the breast of his jacket.

"General Ort, you were invited to this meeting too?" Ridge asked, though he was used to higher-ranking officers being present whenever he was invited to the castle. He was just the trigger for the gun that was his squadron, not someone who had enough clout to be a part of the decision-making process.

"Someone has to hold your hand and make sure you don't put your feet up on the king's furniture. Or make inappropriate jokes about his wardrobe." Ort frowned at Ridge's leather jacket, olive green flight uniform, and mud-spattered boots—they had been clean when Ridge left the base, but it was sludgy and wet out there. Ort must carry a boot-polishing kit in his pocket.

"I would never do such a thing," Ridge said. "The king's furniture is all five-hundred-year-old wood and scratchy upholstery. It's not nearly as comfortable as the leather chairs in your office."

"They didn't keep you in that frozen hole in the Ice Blades nearly long enough. Your sense of military courtesy and propriety hasn't improved one iota." Ort jerked his head toward one of the high-ceilinged hallways that opened up on either side of the entryway. The king wasn't sitting on the ceremonial dais at the end of the runway of a throne room, but the general apparently knew where he could be found.

"I don't think one goes to Magroth to improve *anything*," Ridge said.

He followed Ort down the hallway, through a side door, and onto a balcony with glass ceilings and walls warming the space. Snow might still blanket the garden outside, but inside, the vines of tropical plants twined up support posts and along beams, and birds from all over the continent chirped contentedly from the branches of broad-leafed shrubbery and dwarf orange and lemon trees. A few windows were open along walls lined with flowering plants and bushes, but the birds didn't appear tempted to escape.

King Angulus Masonwood the Third sat with two uniformed men at

the head of a wrought-iron table covered with a floral cloth and doilies that Ridge chose to believe were the queen's influence rather than a suggestion of his taste. He was a stocky man with a broad face, a creased brow, and curly brown hair shorn close to his head, probably because his hairline was receding like troops fleeing an overrun front line. Despite that concession to age, he still had the muscular stature of a soldier, even if it had been twenty years since he had served. He'd been a cavalry officer in one of the few remaining units and was usually depicted on horseback in portraits. On paper, the king was only a few years older than Ridge, but he seemed far closer to sixty than forty. A stressful job, doubtlessly. He watched Ridge and Ort's arrival, though he kept glancing down at a rolled up scrap of paper in his blunt hands.

The general stopped at the foot of the table, clicked his heels together, and saluted. "General Ort and Colonel Zirkander reporting, Your Majesty." He glanced at Ridge, probably to make sure he was saluting.

Ridge was. The king had always treated him with respect, and thus he reciprocated, even if he often got the feeling Angulus wasn't a fan of pomp and circumstance and would have preferred slaps on the back.

"Good." The king waved to seats near the head of the table. "Sit."

He wasn't a fan of long-windedness, either.

The men sitting to either side of the king didn't budge from their positions. Both wore the uniforms and jackets of infantry officers, and both had the addition of silver badges highlighting crossed swords on their chests. The badges signaled placement in one of the army's elite troops units. The stone-faced colonel sitting to the king's right, his meaty arms folded across his chest, gave Ridge a hard, challenging stare. Ridge resisted the urge to make the same comment he had made to the door guard. Barely. The captain to the king's left had a bland, forgettable face, brown eyes, dark brown hair, and tanned skin that, given the winter season, hinted of mixed blood.

General Ort gestured for Ridge to sit first. Ridge sat beside the other colonel, bumping elbows as he pulled his chair into the table, and giving the man an insouciant smile as he apologized. The colonel's fingers flexed, as if he was considering how much trouble he might get into for throttling someone at the king's table. Ridge didn't recognize the man, but he'd met any number of ground troops who were unimpressed with pilots and spouted nonsense about how real men fought hand-to-hand and face-to-face. As if most modern ground fighting didn't involve hiding behind something and shooting at people from as far away as possible.

"Gentlemen," Angulus said briskly. "You're here to be briefed on a

secret mission you'll be taking into the Cofah homeland."

Ridge sat up, all thoughts of annoying his table neighbor rushing out of his head. He hadn't been sure what this meeting would be about—for the last few weeks, he had been living in a low-grade state of paranoia, worrying that someone would realize Sardelle wasn't an archaeologist from Charkolt University on the east coast, as he'd been telling everyone—but he hadn't expected a mission. Even if the snow outside was melting today, it was still the middle of winter.

"My best spy was fatally wounded acquiring this information." Angulus glanced at the captain—the man clenched his jaw but said nothing—and spread out the roll of paper, revealing a hastily sketched map with two lines of writing at the top.

Ridge twisted his head to try to read the words, but they were encoded. The king gestured to the captain. "Nowon."

"Cofah intelligence has obtained viable samples of dragon blood," the bland-faced officer recited, his fingers tented before him. "Experiments are ongoing in a secret facility. Viable prototypes have already been created."

"*Dragon* blood?" Ort asked. "And viable prototypes of *what*?"

Ridge was glad his commander had been the one to ask the questions. Of late, he had been hearing too much about magic and sorcerers and how dragon blood in their veins explained their powers. He didn't want to pretend he had any knowledge of the matter, though, because the average Iskandian subject—pilots included—shouldn't. He certainly hadn't before meeting Sardelle.

"Dragons have been extinct for over a thousand years," Ort said. "How could anyone have blood, viable or otherwise?"

The king looked at the captain, but Nowon shook his head. "That's all the note says. We've been aware that the Cofah have been working on weapons and military-funded science projects for some time, but this is the first time we've gotten… someone inside one of their secret facilities." Nowon's jaw had ticked during that pause before the word someone. He must have known the spy who had died, maybe been close.

Ridge leaned back, framing his chin with his fingers. He knew the government had spies, of course, but he had never been invited into their world.

"Is it possible your man was mistaken?" Ort asked. "That the Cofah are simply trying to synthesize dragon blood somehow? Maybe they've found some fossils or something." The general's forehead wrinkled. "Can blood be fossilized?" He looked at Ridge as he asked this last question.

Ridge swallowed, hoping he wasn't about to mention Sardelle. Was he supposed to be some archaeology expert now because he was

supposedly living with one? Sardelle probably knew the answer to the question, but Ridge sure wasn't going to volunteer to have her brought into this meeting. The last thing he wanted was for her to come to the king's attention.

"This man was very good," the captain said. "It is unlikely he would have been mistaken. I not only suspect they've acquired blood, but from a few messages we've intercepted, I believe the Cofah might be very close to weaponizing it somehow."

"I want a more complete report," the king said, holding the flimsy sheet of paper in the air with an irritated quirk of his lips. "And if they have dragon blood, I either want it destroyed or I want it brought back to Iskandia for our own new scientist to analyze." His unsubtle gaze landed on Ridge.

Ridge slumped back in his chair. Was that why he had been called in? Because of his dubious relationship with Lieutenant Caslin Ahn's new… pirate? Ridge didn't doubt that Tolemek "Deathmaker" Targoson could contribute on a scientific level, but Ridge had been somewhat bullied by Sardelle—and her telepathic sword—into vouching for the man. Even knowing what the man had done to help the city, Ridge worried that his loyalty wouldn't last much longer than his infatuation with Lieutenant Ahn. There was a reason the man's lab had guards on it at all times.

"You know Deathmaker," the king said. "How far can he be trusted?"

Insofar as what? He seemed contented enough in his lab, but… Ridge shrugged. "I don't know him well, Sire. He is—*was*—Lieutenant Ahn's prisoner. I do trust Lieutenant Ahn."

The colonel's eyes closed to slits. Ridge doubted the man knew anything about the situation, but he sensed a judgment there. He hoped this mission wouldn't require working with the other officer. Judging by the gray in his hair, he probably had seniority.

"I want you to talk to him, Zirkander," the king said. "If you don't think he's a flight risk, he might be worth taking on this mission."

The colonel's nostrils flared. "Sire, I protest. Deathmaker? The pirate? I don't care who he's mounting now; he's killed thousands of our people."

Ridge's fist balled. He could only imagine the expression that must have been on his face, but it made General Ort kick him under the table and tilt his head toward the king with great significance. Ridge kept his temper. Barely. But he loathed the way the other colonel—what was this bastard's name anyway?—gave him that challenging look again.

"Colonel Therrik," the king said, the censure in his tone present but far too mild for Ridge's tastes. "Lieutenant Ahn is a national hero—all

of those in Zirkander's squadron are—and an unparalleled asset to our armed forces. Respect, if you will."

Therrik, bah. Zirkander had heard that name from young officers recently out of the military academy. He'd taught combat classes there for the last few years and had a reputation for humiliating and pulverizing young men and women, particularly those going into non-combat branches of the army. Ridge wouldn't have guessed he was still going out in the field. Maybe he was here to advise.

"Of course, Sire," Therrik said, though his face didn't soften, nor was there anything apologetic in his expression.

"If anyone can identify dragon blood and what strange things are being done with it," the king said, "Deathmaker probably can."

Actually, *Sardelle* probably could. Ridge tapped his fingers against his thigh, wondering if there was any way he could take her without revealing… anything. Even though they had only been in combat together once—and technically it hadn't been all that together since he had been flying and she had been fighting a shaman on the ground—he would much rather have *her* at his side than Deathmaker or Thugly the Tormentor of Young Pilots.

"He has no loyalty to our people," Therrik said. "He'll go right back to them if he's given the chance."

"He has no loyalty to the Cofah, either," Ridge said. "Nor would they be happy to have him. My understanding is that he… plugged up both outhouses on the property, as one of my country-bred pilots would say."

"Classy," Ort murmured with another head tilt that was probably supposed to remind Ridge that they were in the presence of royalty. Eh, if the king had been a soldier, he had surely seen an outhouse once or twice in his life.

"I gather that he can't return to the pirates, either," Ridge said, "at least not to the Roaming Curse. His… lady friend is here. He has more reason to stay loyal to Iskandia than to leave us."

"Oh, sure," Therrik grumbled. "I'm sure that's the sort of romance that books are written about."

Ridge hadn't been enthused at the idea of a mass-murdering pirate for his young lieutenant, but he would defend her right to pick whomever she wanted, with fists if necessary. Even if that would get *him* pummeled.

"Get him on the team if you can," the king said.

"The team for what, exactly, Sire?" Ort asked.

"Zirkander and the necessary pilots will fly Therrik and two of his best men—" the king nodded toward Captain Nowon, "—into Cofah territory to infiltrate this research facility. I want the dragon blood destroyed or brought back, and I want any progress they've made

likewise destroyed. I also want to know where that blood came from in the first place."

"Who's in charge of the mission?" Therrik asked, his face cool as he regarded Ridge again.

"You are, Colonel." The king pulled a folded piece of paper out of a pocket and pushed it toward Ridge. "These are the coordinates for the secret facility." Turning back toward Therrik, he continued, "Zirkander and his people will get you and your men where you need to go and wait for you to return."

Ridge scowled—he was being assigned rickshaw service?—at the same time as Therrik issued his first smile. It was an alarming thing, like a wolf curling its lips.

"That's acceptable, Sire," Therrik.

Ridge opened his mouth, and Ort kicked him under the table again. Ridge scowled at him. It was worse than having dinner at a girlfriend's parents' house with her stomping on a man's foot to ensure he delivered the proper responses. General Ort utterly lacked any of the girlfriend qualities that would have made such interference bearable.

"I must respectfully object to Deathmaker's inclusion on the mission, Sire," Therrik added. "He can't be trusted. Why can't he just study the dragon blood when we bring it back? And I assure you, we *are* good enough to bring it back."

The captain's eyebrows twitched ever so slightly at the word we. Ridge wasn't sure whether it indicated doubt as to the colonel's abilities—probably not—or doubt as to whether the colonel was needed at all. Maybe this had originally been Nowon's mission. He was the one who knew about the spy and had decrypted the message, after all.

"If there's anything more troublesome than samples of blood in vials, you may need his help," the king said, giving Ridge a nod.

Ridge had been the one to explain how Tolemek had destroyed a device full of a deadly toxin to save the city. He hadn't been able to mention Sardelle's role in the event—or rather her *sword's* role—so Tolemek had received full credit. Ridge didn't resent that exactly, but it rankled him that he couldn't speak openly about what Sardelle had done to help defend their homeland. It rankled him even more now that Ridge had learned that the pirate's infamous potion-making abilities weren't entirely mundane.

"Speak to him and come to an understanding ahead of time if necessary, but plan on taking him," the king said, staring steadily into the colonel's eyes.

"An understanding." Therrik flexed his fingers, then curled them into a fist. "Yes, Sire."

Therrik planned to beat Tolemek into loyalty? Oh, yes, that would

work well.

"Zirkander, choose three good pilots to take with you. You'll fly the two-seaters and each take one of Therrik's three-man team, along with Deathmaker, if he'll come. Therrik, you can decide whether he's going into the compound with you or not, but I urge you to take him so he can help identify what's worth taking and what's not."

"What can kill you in the blink of an eye and what can't," Nowon murmured. He obviously knew a little more about what was going on in those Cofah facilities than what was on the note.

"While you men complete your mission," the king went on, "The pilots will wait in a safe area with the fliers camouflaged. It probably goes without saying, but my preference is to have you all in and out without ever being seen. The repercussions might be less harsh if the Cofah can't prove we had anything to do with their missing samples."

"We understand, Sire," Therrik said.

Ridge nodded, though he still hated the idea of having Therrik in charge of this. He supposed the colonel couldn't be too much of an ass on the mission, not when Ridge's team would be his only way home.

"Dismissed," the king said.

Ridge pushed back his chair, as did Ort and Nowon.

"May I have one more word with you in private, Sire?" Therrik asked, glancing at Ridge.

The king nodded. Ridge didn't like that quick glance, but he walked away with the others. He *did*, however, dawdle, pausing on the other side of a large shrub to prop his boot on the pot and tie the laces.

"What is it?" Angulus asked.

"Captain Nowon's people handle external intelligence gathering," Therrik said, "but my old unit handled internal, and I've been made aware of some interesting developments of late."

That might explain how the colonel knew about Ahn and Tolemek's relationship, something Ridge hadn't thought would be common gossip outside of his squadron. He lifted his other boot to retie the laces.

"Your point?" the king had moved away from the table, and Ridge barely heard the words. He parted the branches of the shrub. The men were walking toward one of the windows overlooking the garden.

"Zirkander's witch," Therrik said, and Ridge's heart nearly stopped. "Are you sure we shouldn't—"

"Colonel," Ort hissed from the doorway. "What are you doing?"

Ridge wanted to wave him away, to shush him so he could hear the rest, but the king and Therrik had moved out of earshot, anyway. Damn, he needed to know what they were talking about.

Ridge raced toward the doorway, almost knocking Ort aside as he blurted, "I'll meet up with you at the hangar, General. I need to piss."

He glanced back, catching Ort giving that potted plant a long, concerned look. Ridge ran through the hallway, but instead of racing toward the front door, he ran in the opposite direction, then swung into a narrow staircase that led down to a door to the gardens. He vaguely remembered indoor latrines somewhere in that direction and thought his excuse might be plausible. Even if it wasn't, he would risk demerits from Ort. He had to know what they were saying about Sardelle. It wasn't surprising that the intelligence department had put the pieces together—just because he hadn't mentioned her role in the battle back at the mines didn't mean there hadn't been witnesses and that the truth would come out—but if someone like Therrik knew about her, how many other people might know? And what did the king think?

The side door was thankfully unguarded. Ridge charged out and hopped the fence into the gardens. Despite the day's sun, three inches of snow blanketed everything. He ran through the melting stuff, following the side of the building, forcing himself to slow as he neared the first open window on the greenhouse balcony above. He hugged the wall so nobody looking out from above should see him. The sounds of birds chirping floated out, but he couldn't hear voices. He crept to the next open window. A shadow moved behind the glass. The king? The faint murmur of a conversation reached his ears, but he couldn't make out the words.

The skeleton of a vining plant, its leaves shed months ago and snow blanketing its brown limbs, snaked up the brick side of the building, passing the window and reaching all the way to the roof of the greenhouse. Ridge had no idea if it would support his weight—the center trunk was about three inches thick, but didn't look very hale beneath the snow—but desperation drove him to try.

He gripped the plant and pulled himself off the ground. The trunk shivered, and snow splatted down his shoulders, but it didn't crack or pull away from the wall. He hoped the two men inside were too engrossed in the conversation—about Sardelle, damn!—to notice branches shivering in the utter lack of wind.

Ridge stopped before his head drew level with the bottom of the window. Besides, the trunk had dwindled in thickness from three inches to two, and it was starting to slump. His boots were pressed into the plant below him, but they kept slipping. Dry wood and cold snow pricked at his fingers. He should have put on his gloves before jumping onto the vine. His efforts were rewarded, though, for he could hear more than chirping birds this time.

"—told me," Therrik was saying. "The officers in my old unit don't miss much."

"I suppose it'll be all over the city before long." The king sighed.

“I can’t understand why you let her into the city in the first place, Sire. Why wasn’t she shot as soon as someone figured it out?”

Ridge gritted his teeth, in part because a piece of the vine had snapped away from its anchor on a post above his head, and in part because he wanted to lunge through the window and strangle Therrik.

“I believe she was shot any number of times during the battle with the Cofah,” the king said dryly. “A sorceress isn’t easy to kill.”

Sorceress. He hadn’t called her a witch. Could the king know everything? Intel must have interviewed that research-happy Captain Heriton from Magroth.

“Not when she’s awake, likely not,” Therrik said. “We have snipers. One of our men could take her out in her sleep.”

If Ridge had disliked the colonel before, he was ready to hurl the man into a volcano now. His shoulders flexed, and he caught himself climbing another foot on the vine with an image in his mind of leaping through the window, repercussions be damned. But another limb snapped away from the wall overhead, and he found his perch sagging a couple of inches away from the window. He gritted his teeth and eyed the ledge. He might be able to make the lunge…

“That would be a poor reward for Zirkander’s years of loyalty,” the king said, his tone still dry.

Therrik snorted. “If you want to reward the man, give him a medal, not a witch. Sire, do we even know he’s voluntarily housing her? She could be using him—*controlling* him—without him even knowing it.”

Not that idiotic argument again. Everyone seemed sure Ridge had a mind feebler than that of an eighty-year-old amnesiac.

“I’ve read her record,” the king said. “If she had been one of the rogues from her century, she would already be dead. She was a healer who worked with the army.”

Huh, the king’s research had been even more thorough than Heriton’s, it seemed.

“Her… century, Sire?” Therrik asked.

“Never mind.”

“Please, hear me, Sire. I don’t think Zirkander’s a suitable guard dog for a witch, especially not if he’s sleeping with her. Besides, he’s not even here half the time, and she’s free to roam at will.”

“I have people watching her. If it becomes a problem… I’ll reassess the situation.”

People watching her? Ridge swallowed. And here he had joked at Sardelle’s assertion that she didn’t feel safe doing her work on base. Maybe the grandmother next door *was* keeping an eye on her.

“This is a bomb waiting to detonate, Sire. If you don’t do anything about her, you can trust that someone will. A lot of people are very afraid of magic.”

"I'm aware of that, Colonel," the king said, his tone cooler now.

Sardelle is in trouble! The words and an image of the old archives building in town blasted into Ridge's mind like a foghorn, startling him so that he lost his grip.

He tried to catch himself, his fingers wrapping around a branch, and he thought he might have saved himself, but the brittle limb snapped. He plummeted to the ground. He bent his knees, trying to soften the landing and keep himself from making a lot of noise, but one of his heels struck something slippery. His leg flew out from beneath him, and he landed on his back. He rolled and came up in a crouch, ready to flee away before anyone could look out the window and spot him. With his first step, he almost crashed into General Ort.

"Are you *insane*?" the general whispered, glancing up at the open window and keeping his voice low. He grabbed Ridge by the arm before he could answer, dragging him toward the garden gate. "Are you *trying* to throw away a twenty-year career?"

"No, sir," Ridge responded, but his focus was inward. That had to have been Sardelle's sword that had yelled into his thoughts. It had never spoken to him before, but he knew it communicated with Sardelle, and apparently it had done so with Tolemek, as well. Another time, the telepathic intrusion would have made him as uncomfortable as ants crawling on his skin, but the content of the message was more important than the fact of it.

What do you mean? he asked in his mind, having no way of knowing if the sword could hear him. *What kind of trouble?*

"Don't tell me you were looking for a place to piss in the garden," Ort growled. "I'm sure there's a rule on the books somewhere about leaving yellow snow on the castle grounds."

Ridge shook his head, hoping for clarification from the sword. But nothing came.

"I wasn't thinking, sir. That's all. If this mission starts tomorrow, I have to run to the hangar, select my team, and make sure everyone and everything gets packed and ready today." By now, they had reached the main courtyard, with its guards stationed all around. Ridge couldn't have gone back for more spying, even if he dared. It didn't matter. Sardelle was in trouble. He quickened his steps. "I'll report back to you at the end of the day, sir." Not waiting to be dismissed, he broke into a run.

"You better," Ort called after him.

Ridge raced through the castle gate with little more than an acknowledging wave. He sprinted down the icy street, ignoring the startled looks he inspired from passersby, and headed for the archives building.

Chapter 2

Sardelle hunkered on her hands and knees in a corner as books and pieces of the ceiling continued to fall onto the shield she had gathered around herself. Her lantern was buried, and she couldn't see a thing, but she sensed two people at the top of the stairs leading to the basement. They were armed. Somehow, she doubted they were patrons of the archives, simply curious about the noise. Rubble blocked the doorway on her side, so they wouldn't be coming to investigate soon. She muffled a cough—some of the dust flooding the basement had gotten to her before she had formed her shield—not wanting to make noise, regardless. Let them think her dead.

When the final book fell, she risked lowering her shield, so she could create a light. A soft orange glow filled the space, its influence dimmed by the haze in the air. It didn't matter. Her other senses had already told her the story. She was blocked in until she cleared that doorway—or someone else did. Going out that way might not be wise, anyway. She touched the wall behind her, stretching her mind out in that direction, wondering if there might be more than dirt and earth out there. In a city this old, one expected layers upon layers of civilization.

Hm, yes, there *was* a passage out there. Or, more likely, a sewer tunnel. Either could offer her an alternative exit. The mortar holding the old, chipped bricks together was already crumbling. It shouldn't take much effort to tear away at it. She let go of the light—maintaining two ongoing forms of energy was always a challenge—to reestablish her shield, in case her architectural deconstruction resulted in a cave-in. Another one.

She could have pulled down the wall in one quick move, but she didn't want to make noise. The people on the steps were still there, waiting like snipers. They might decide to close in if they thought she was escaping. Sardelle didn't know who they were, but she didn't want to deal with them.

The bricks slipped free with soft clunks and thunks. Of course, there was another layer of bricks behind them. Time ticked past as she removed the puzzle pieces one by one.

A soft rattle came from the other side of the rubble pile, someone trying the doorknob. Her snipers had grown tired of waiting. The door opened inward, so she ought to have more time before they could clear a route.

"No," came a distant, shrill command from the stairwell. "No more explosives. Not in my building."

Sardelle recognized the archivist's voice—and the fact that she might have run out of time. She pulled down the bricks more vigorously, wincing when they banged and clanked as they landed. A musty scent wafted in along with a cool draft. It didn't smell like a sewer. That was promising.

"—hear her," someone said on the other side of the door.

They heard *her*. Not *someone*. There was no question for them as to who their trapped prey was. Well, Sardelle wouldn't be trapped for long.

Judging the hole large enough, she started to squirm through. She halted in the middle, her stomach draped across bricks, remembering the scrolls with the genealogical trees. She created her light again and stumbled across the rubble to the spot where she'd last seen them. A broken table lay across the bin of scrolls. She flung debris aside, no longer worrying about making noise, and yanked out the red-banded ones.

"Hurry," someone urged on the other side of the door.

Sardelle didn't hear or sense the archivist. She must have been ushered away somehow. Who were these people, anyway? Government spies with orders to get rid of her? She had sensed people watching Ridge's house—watching *her* in the past weeks—but they had never approached her.

A question to answer later. With the scrolls unceremoniously stuffed into her satchel, along with the books she had grabbed earlier, she climbed across the bricks. She was about to crawl into the space on the other side, which turned out to be tighter than she had estimated, when a boom sounded behind her. Whoever wanted her didn't care a whit about destroying public property.

Sardelle used the noise to bring down more bricks and hide the hole she had made. They would find it eventually, but not right away. She hoped.

She pulled herself upright in the passage outside of the basement and found she couldn't walk through it, not without scraping her hips and shoulders into a pulp. The floor was uneven and littered with rocks and sticks or some other type of debris she didn't bother to identify. She didn't bother with a light, either—she wasn't certain how effectively she had covered that hole and didn't want any rays seeping back into the basement for those two people to see.

Turning sideways, Sardelle shuffled along, her heavy satchel bumping against the walls, impeding her progress. When she checked to see if there might be a room on the other side of the crawlspace, she found nothing but filled-in earth for several meters. At least she was heading in the direction of the street.

Her satchel snagged on some obstacle in the way. She tried to push it aside, but it stuck out of the wall. She leaned forward and patted around, trying to figure out if it went all the way across or if she could climb over or duck under. Something else snagged her hair. Grumbling, she tried to draw back. Her knuckles brushed against the wall. It had turned from brick into dirt at some point. The thing in her path seemed to be a branch, or maybe a tree root. Had she gone the wrong way? Maybe she wasn't heading toward the street at all.

Sardelle risked a small light and gasped, stumbling backward. The human leg bone sticking out of the wall wasn't what she had expected at all. Her heel caught on one of the rocks, and she almost pitched to the ground. The narrowness of the passage saved her, for she flung her arms out, catching herself. What she'd thought was a rock was part of a skull. There were a number of them behind her—she had been stepping all over them, kicking them to the side. Nubs of bones were sticking out all along the dirt wall.

It took a moment for her heart to quiet its rapid beating… and for her to realize this must be the edge of some old cemetery or catacomb. The bones were yellow and brittle with age; they had been residents of this place for a long time.

"What a strange research trip this is," she whispered.

Back in the basement, rock or brick shifted, reminding her that those people would be expecting to find her in that room. She hustled forward, crawling awkwardly under the bone obstacles. Noises came from ahead, clack-clunks that echoed oddly in the small passage. Horse hooves? On cobblestones? She thought she might find a way up to the street, but ultimately her passage simply continued under it. It turned and she stumbled across more debris, this time broken ceramic jugs. She touched the wall in spots, trying to sense an opening ahead or another basement nearby. Finally, she found the latter. There was nobody in it, and the wall was in poor condition here as well. She carefully tore away bricks, feeling bad about her vandalism, but she had no intention of wandering this maze beneath the city all day.

She squeezed through her hole and into a basement full of old distilling equipment. She climbed creaking wood stairs that led to a ground-level building. Clanks and the smells of food wafted down the hall, but she turned in the opposite direction, finding a door leading to an alley. Outside, she slumped against the wall, relieved to be in daylight again. Horses and wagons passed in the nearby street.

Disoriented, Sardelle crept to the end of the alley to see where she was. She snorted. The front door of the archives was across the street and only one building away. It had seemed like she had been underground far longer than that. She poked her head out and peered in both directions, then yanked her head right back into the alley. There were two slender figures in cloaks watching the archives building. The same two that had been blowing their way into the basement? No, this felt like another two. Both women. Interesting.

Sardelle backed up and nearly cried out when she ran into someone.

"Most people have to go inside the archives building to do research," a familiar voice drawled, "but I suppose you have those special powers."

"Ridge," she whispered with heartfelt relief, facing him for a sound kiss, though she wasn't ready to turn her back on the street—and those spies—for long. Those women hadn't moved. They were like statues watching the front door.

"What are we spying on?" Ridge slipped his arms around her waist and hugged her from behind. It wasn't always easy to tell when he was worried, since he made flippant remarks no matter what, but she sensed his concern wrapping around her along with his arms. For a moment, she basked in it, admiring the handsome line of his jaw over her shoulder. A month of living together had yet to dull the almost giddy pleasure she experienced in his company. Then it occurred to her to wonder what had brought him here in the middle of the day. And why he was breathing so heavily. With sweat trickling down the side of his face. Had he run all the way here?

She squeezed his arm to let him know she appreciated the embrace and answered his question before asking her own. "Those two women in the cloaks. There are more inside who tried to trap me in the basement. How'd you know I was in trouble?"

"Your sword chose an inopportune moment to jump into my head." Ridge dropped one arm to rub his backside.

"Jaxi? I told her not to do that to you. I—Jaxi! I forgot about her."

"She's in danger too?"

"In danger of being discovered, anyway. Someone was sneaking into your house." *Jaxi? Did you and the beer steins drive away the intruders?*

"More women in cloaks?"

"I don't know. She's not answering. Do you have time to stop at home before going back to work?"

He hesitated, and she flinched inwardly. He probably hadn't had time to come to her rescue in the first place, but he had clearly made it.

“Yes.” Ridge stepped back and dusted a cobweb from her hair. “But I have to tell you about my latest mission on the way. You’re not injured, are you?”

“No.” She swatted at dust clinging to her dress.

Ridge frowned at her, as if he wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth. He didn’t question her, though. He pointed toward the archives building. “Not that you need my assertive and manly help in matters, but do you want me to question those women and get some information before we go?”

“I don’t know… Would you be getting information with force or with charm?”

“If I follow in my already established pattern for the day, I’d dangle from a vine outside their window.”

“There’s a story I’d like to hear about.”

“And yet, oddly, I’m not inclined to share it.” Ridge grinned, then tilted his chin toward the street, silently asking his question again.

It was probably a vain hope, but Sardelle didn’t want to drag Ridge into her trouble. He stood to lose so much if people found out he was protecting a sorceress. A witch, they would call her.

“No,” Sardelle said. “Leave them be. Better to just disappear.”

For a moment, he looked like he would argue, but he sighed and said, “As you wish.”

He released her from his hug but held her hand as he started toward the opposite end of the alley. He paused before he had gone more than a step. “Ah, by *disappear*, did you mean walk briskly back to the house to check on your sword, or did you mean something more…” He waved his hand in the air and raised his eyebrows.

Sardelle smiled and started walking at his side. Someday, she would give him the full list of what she could and could not do, but the notion that she could do anything magical at all hadn’t stopped making him twitch. It would take more time for him to grow accustomed to her abilities. Assuming she remained in the city and they had that time. She gave a long look over her shoulder before letting him lead her into the next street.

. . . . .

“How long will you be gone?” Sardelle asked as the gate guard passed them onto the installation. She was worried about Jaxi and setting a fast pace, but Ridge’s proclamation that he was heading to Cofahre, for what could only be a dangerous mission, had her doubly concerned. “And would it be terribly inappropriate if I arranged to be on the continent at the same time? I promised Tolemek I would find a way to get his sister, and…” She groped for a way to suggest that she could be useful if she were there with Ridge without implying that he

needed her help.

He gave her a sidelong look. “Tolemek should be coming with us, if Colonel Ice Butt doesn’t offend him so deeply that he flees the country ahead of time. Albeit, this isn’t a quest to get his sister.”

“Will Lieutenant Ahn be going too?”

Ridge nodded. “I’m not sure I could get anyone else to willingly fly with the Deathmaker sitting in the back seat. That would even make *my* shoulder blades itchy.”

“Ah.” It was silly—Sardelle wasn’t a part of his world and certainly not trusted by his military, so she couldn’t expect to be invited along—but she already felt lonely at the thought of the few friends she had made all leaving her. As the weeks had passed, she had grown more distressed about the comrades and kin she would never see again, rather than less. In the beginning, it had been as if she had been off on some adventure in a strange new land, with her family waiting back at home. But she’d had more quiet time of late, and it had finally sunken in that there was no one back at home. There wasn’t even a home anymore.

“I’d rather have you with us than roaming the continent on your own.” Ridge chewed on his lip as they rounded the corner onto his street. “And I’m not enthused about the idea of leaving you here, either, especially when there’s so much interest in you right now.”

“I don’t suppose there’s a luggage compartment on those fliers that you could stick me in.”

“Uh, they’re not really made for long-distance voyages. Just ask Ahn about the tube.”

“The tube?”

“Never mind. You’ll find out when you ride in one.” Ridge squinted down the street toward his house. It had come into view and was still standing. There wasn’t any smoke billowing from broken windows. “If you’d agree to do the work of my machine guns, we might be able to mount you in front of the cockpit.”

Sardelle was trying to imagine the feasibility of this—thus far, she had only seen the fliers from the ground—when she caught his quick smirk. “Ah, that was a joke.”

“Let me mull on things. I might come up with something.”

“Don’t get in trouble on my behalf, please.” She already worried they would find trouble at his house when they arrived.

Yes, about that… You might not want to bring the homeowner in just yet.

Jaxi! Why haven’t you been talking to me? And what do you expect me to do with Ridge? We’re only a half a block away.

I’ve been using a lot of effort to remain hidden. Those women had some sort of device with them that could detect magic. I had to figure out how to

thwart it. I don't care for all these new technological advancements. This century is complicated. As for your pretty pilot, take him for a few laps around the block.

He's not a dog, Jaxi.

Fine, but I can't be blamed. I was only defending myself. I'm pretty sure those women were looking for me specifically. They kept muttering about swords.

"Jaxi says the house may not be as we left it," Sardelle said, following Ridge up the walkway. "The intruders weren't tidy. She's trying to clean up now."

Ridge stopped with his hand on the door. "Do you know how strange that sounds?"

"The idea that Jaxi would do something so helpful as cleaning? Or the fact that she can?"

"All of that, yes."

Sardelle put a supporting hand on his arm, in case he needed it when they walked inside. He opened the door, and a picture frame zipped past, inches from his face. He blinked slowly as he turned to watch it float across the room and affix itself to the wall above his stove. Then his eyes lowered and stayed closed. He took a deep breath.

Sardelle winced and walked inside for a closer look. *You made this mess? Or the intruders did?*

It was them. But possibly they didn't start throwing things around in disgust until I started dropping pots on their heads.

The awful green-and-yellow couch didn't look any more appealing when it was lying on its back, its cushions thrown across the room. Chairs and tables were likewise overturned, and Ridge's picture collection was all over the floor and dusted with something white. Oh, a flour canister had been knocked over, the powder strewn everywhere. Pots and pans littered the floor in the kitchen. Something that looked like a smear of blood decorated one of the counters.

A cold draft rustled Sardelle's dress. Ridge had opened his eyes, but he was still standing in the doorway, staring.

She grimaced. "Are you dumbfounded because of the mess? Or because your pictures are rehanging themselves?"

Ridge shut the door, removed his cap, and scraped his fingers through his hair. "All of that, yes," he repeated.

He managed one of his quirky grins for her. It didn't seem forced—he had looked more stunned than truly upset—but that didn't keep her from feeling bad. This was her fault.

"Let me check on Jaxi. And make sure she's still snuggled in with your mug collection."

"My what?"

“You have a number of glass steins under the bed. We’ve, ah, discussed them.”

“Oh, I was wondering where those went. People always give them to me whenever the squadron helps out in different parts of the country and lands long enough for a drink. I started to get concerned about my reputation after I received the tenth or twelfth. I do like a drink now and then, but does the average Iskandian subject think I’m perpetually drunk?” A heavy thud sounded as Ridge pushed the couch into the upright position. He was the first to admit it was loathsome, but he sprawled on it to read every night. Sardelle wondered if it was telling that it was the first thing he straightened.

“Probably not if they’ve seen you fly.” Sardelle fished Jaxi out from beneath the bed and tucked her purloined scrolls behind the box of steins at the same time. “Those loopy loops and twisty screw moves you do would be difficult in an inebriated state.”

It’s about time. None of this would have happened if you’d taken me with you in the first place.

Keep nagging like that. It’ll ensure I want to take you places.

Please, you know I’m perfectly capable of nagging, no matter where in the world you are.

“Loopy… loops? I’m going to make sure nobody ever puts you on a committee for naming things.”

“*Is* there such a committee?” Sardelle had met a number of his pilots and had to wonder who had thought Pimples, Duck, and Weasel would be good names for brave young men who risked their lives daily.

A knock sounded at the front door, and Ridge didn’t answer her.

Same people, Jaxi?

No. A man I haven’t encountered before. He has two pistols and a number of knives hidden under his jacket.

Sardelle hurried out of the bedroom and entered the living room as Ridge opened the door. His hand twitched toward the pistol under his own jacket, and she tensed, ready to defend him.

The man standing outside wasn’t tall, broad, or beefy, but he wore black trousers, a black turtleneck shirt, and a black jacket. He had fine features, a cleft chin, short sandy hair combed to one side, and frosty green eyes. Though he stood several inches shorter than Ridge, he had a presence that made him seem larger. Intimidating. Ridge didn’t take a step back, but something in the way he held his shoulders made Sardelle believe he wanted to. The man’s gaze swept past Ridge, taking in the disheveled living room—and her—with a faint sneer.

“Ahnsung,” Ridge said. “I’d feign surprise that the guards let you on the post, but I suppose you go where you want.”

“They don’t know I’m here.”

“Seems they don’t know a lot of people are here these days. I’m going to talk to someone about additional training.”

The man—Ahnsung—didn’t smile or give any indication that he appreciated the humor. It was the opposite, rather, with his brows lowering, as if he was considering a punch to Ridge’s nose. Or something worse. Sardelle might assume this was some superior officer, since Ridge so often butted heads with them, but if this man were in the military, wouldn’t he be wearing a uniform? It was the middle of the workday.

“You here to threaten me again, Ahnsung?” Ridge asked.

“No.” The green eyes closed to slits. “Though you’re fortunate you weren’t here last month. I would have shot you if you had been.”

Sardelle gaped. Ridge merely grunted and said, “Not surprising.”

Last month? What had been happening then? She and Ridge had still been up at that fort.

“You’re about to take her into trouble again,” Ahnsung said.

All at once, the puzzle pieces snapped into place. Her. Ahnsung. Last month, Lieutenant Ahn had been reported dead. This must be a relative. A father? Nobody had spoken of such a person to her, but other than the weekends at Ridge’s cabin, when she had been more intent on teaching Tolemek, Sardelle hadn’t spent much time with Ahn. The man was old enough to be her father. Late forties.

“Amazing how quickly news from secret meetings with the king gets around,” Ridge said.

How could this man know what members of his team Ridge was choosing to take on this new mission? He hadn’t told anyone except Sardelle yet, had he? Unless Ahnsung had been spying on them while they’d been walking. If so, he was good. She hadn’t sensed a thing. Jaxi hadn’t warned her, either.

I was busy picking up pots and picture frames. And might I point out how lowly a task that is for someone with my talent? You’d think I was someone’s apprentice.

Those years of demeaning tasks shouldn’t be so far back in your memory. You were barely past your apprenticeship when you stored yourself in the soulblade.

Please, I’d been a full-fledged sorcerer for years.

I did look up your history before we bonded, Sardelle pointed out. *You hadn’t even finished your final papers.*

Because I knew I was dying by then. As if I was going to waste my last months writing papers when there were enemies to turn to ash.

Ah, my apologies.

Jaxi seemed to have come to terms with the shortness of her life long before Sardelle had met her, but every now and then, a sense of wistfulness or regret slipped past the sarcastic irreverence.

"If you take her to Cofahre," Ahnsung said, "I'll hold you responsible for her."

"I consider myself responsible for all of my pilots," Ridge said.

"I also consider you responsible for the fact that she's running around with that—" the man's lips twisted into a much more open sneer than the earlier one, "—*pirate*." Sardelle didn't need a sorcerer's talent for telepathy to know that wasn't the first word that had come to his mind.

"I don't see how I can be responsible for who she's involved with —"

"If you hadn't let her get shot down, she never would have been a prisoner of war." Ahnsung leaned forward, pointing at Ridge's nose. "She never would have met that beast."

"I wasn't there when she was shot down. I was following my orders to be elsewhere. Even if I had been there, this is a dangerous job, and it's possible that something will happen someday, something I can't stop. You'd better reconcile yourself to that. Or, here's a thought: why don't you talk to *her* about her work and who she's sleeping with?"

Ridge was tense. Ahnsung was tenser.

Sardelle loosened the barriers she usually kept around her mind, both for her sanity and to give other people their privacy, trying to get a feel for what Ahnsung intended to do, besides scowl. Was he truly a danger?

His mind was more schooled than Sardelle would have expected from the glacial expression fixed on Ridge, and he didn't give away much, at least on a surface reading. She did catch Tolemek's face floating around in his thoughts. This confrontation had more to do with Cas's new friend than the danger she might be in from Ridge's new mission. Sardelle didn't dare dig deeper. Aside from the morality issue, some people could sense sorcerers poking around in their thoughts.

He's a sniper, and he wouldn't mind putting a hole into your lover's chest—they seem to have a history of arguments. Even if she had been young—and hadn't bothered with those final papers—Jaxi had been a more skilled telepath than Sardelle ever would be, and she could slip into and out of another's thoughts without alerting them, usually even when dealing with sorcerers. Not that they encountered many of those these days. *It seems he doesn't randomly kill people, though. Only if he's paid. He has contemplated finding someone to pay him to shoot Colonel Zirkander.*

Sardelle clenched her hand into a fist. Ridge wouldn't appreciate having a woman protect him in a fight, but that wouldn't stop her from doing it if he was in danger. *Why?*

Because Ridge was the one to encourage his daughter to join the

military, and he backed her up when she wanted to attend flight school. Ahnsung wanted her to follow in his footsteps. Join the family business.

The family business? Shooting people?

Apparently he's quite well known for it.

Lovely.

"I gather you haven't spoken to her in years," Ridge said, after they had glared at each other for a while. "She might appreciate it if you stopped by to check on her." As if the man's icy stare mattered nothing to him, Ridge offered a wry smirk. "Let her introduce you to her pirate. Maybe they'll take you out to dinner. Wait, that might not be a good idea. I hear he has a number of strange potions he can slip into a man's food."

Ahnsung stood there seething for a long moment, but he finally lowered his finger. "You like to walk the cliff's edge, don't you?"

"Just living up to the name Dad stuck me with."

Ahnsung snorted softly.

"We're leaving in the morning," Ridge said. "She'll be packing tonight. Plenty of time for you to stop by, say a few words. Give her some fatherly advice on staying alive in enemy territory."

Ahnsung clasped his hands behind his back. He'd recovered his equanimity and didn't react to Ridge's words, other than to look past him again, considering Sardelle and the mess around her.

"Your home is in disarray," he said.

"It must be those keen observational skills that make you such a fine sniper."

Ahnsung reached under the flap of his jacket. Ridge tensed again, and Sardelle felt the surge of concern go through him as he wondered if he had pushed the man too far. But Ahnsung merely withdrew a business card and extended it.

"Er?" Ridge frowned at it without taking it.

"In case you are in need of my services." Ahnsung laid the card on the side of an upended bookcase near the door, then walked away without another word.

Sardelle waited for Ridge to close the door before saying, "Did that man just offer to kill your home intruders for you?"

"I believe so." Ridge pushed a hand through his hair, leaving it in a state of disarray that matched the room's, albeit the hair was attractive like that, the room less so. "For the right price. I don't know what he thinks officers make these days, but I doubt I could afford him."

Sardelle stepped past a potted plant, the dirt spilled onto the carpet, and slipped her arms around Ridge's waist to give him a hug.

He returned it without hesitation, resting his cheek against her hair. "What's this for?"

"All the craziness I've brought into your life."

Ridge chuckled softly into her hair. "I'm not above accepting affections given out of guilt, but I should inform you that my life was hectic before I met you too. In fact, certain colleagues have suggested that my unique personality and unconventional approach to life attracts interesting people and unorthodox situations. So if you're some kind of repository of craziness, it was probably inevitable that you found me."

"Were these colleagues who respected you or were they trying to point out a character flaw?" Sardelle appreciated his attempts to make her feel better—and let him know with a touch to the cheek and a fond smile—even if she couldn't shirk her guilt that easily.

"I believe so, yes." Ridge sighed and released her with reluctance. "I need to get up to the hangar. General Ort's already going to be wondering about my diversion. I need to pick the rest of the team, not to mention visiting Lieutenant Ahn's pirate."

It amused Sardelle that Tolemek was still Ahn's pirate to him, even when the four of them had spent several days together out at his cabin and she had started teaching Tolemek to recognize his talent and apply it to more than the creation of potions. Of course, Ridge had done his best to pretend nothing of a magical nature was going on by wandering out to fish, never mind that he had to break a hole in the ice and sit on a snowy stump in freezing weather to pursue the hobby.

"I have to convince him to come along," Ridge added.

"Tell him you'll fly past his sister's sanitarium."

"That did occur to me. But it's a big continent, and I don't know if our destination and his are within a thousand miles of each other."

"Your fliers cover ground quickly. If you flew at night and weren't noticed…" Sardelle shrugged. She shouldn't push too hard. It would be convenient for her, certainly, if Ridge could pick up the sister while he was there anyway, but she would find a way if he didn't. It would be interesting to see the world and how much it had changed during her sleep. Granted, her Iskandian complexion would be troublesome for navigating Cofahre, but she could manage.

"Two problems," Ridge said. "First, we still wouldn't have a spot for an extra passenger. Second, I'm not in command of the mission. I'm just… the flying rickshaw service."

"No chance the mission commander can be enticed to deviate?"

"It would take someone a lot prettier than me to entice that man to do anything." Ridge gave her a farewell kiss and opened the door. "My apologies for leaving you with a mess. I'll come back and help clean it up tonight." He waved and jogged down the path to the street, his pace quick enough that Sardelle regretted having delayed him by bringing him back here.

She didn't want to spend their last night together cleaning, either. Of course, if she could figure out a way to go with him, it wouldn't *have* to be their last night together.

We're going on a trip? Jaxi sounded excited.

I'm not sure. Are you willing to ride strapped to a flier like a machine gun?

The view would be better than from under the bed. And you can escape these people trying to blow you up and steal me.

Yes, but I'd rather solve that problem than run from it. Can you describe the people who were here, throwing things around?

Women in cloaks. Not a uniform, but they were wearing trousers rather than dresses.

Like the woman who was following me earlier?

Yes.

Sardelle wondered if she had time to do a little research before Ridge returned from work.

It depends. Are we going to clean the house or leave that for him?

I thought you could clean the house while I went to a library. Sardelle smiled. She didn't truly intend to leave Jaxi again, not with people hunting for her, but it was fun to tease her from time to time.

You know, I don't have *to stay out of your thoughts when you and old Ridgewalker are enjoying your athletic embraces. I could comment on your technique.*

Sardelle grimaced. *Given that you've admitted you passed away before garnering any personal experience in that area, I don't think it would be fair of you to judge.*

Oh, but I've read a lot *of books. And had some handlers who were much more libidinous than you. I've seen much.*

Why don't we just clean up this mess as a team, then go to the library together?

What a marvelous idea.

Chapter 3

Ridge knew he had dawdled too long when he found General Ort—scowling as usual—and the bland-faced Captain Nowon waiting inside the hangar door, along with a third officer, who wore the elite troops silver badge on her uniform. Yes, her. Ridge blinked and looked twice. Women weren't allowed into the infantry units, and while the elite troops were a somewhat different creature, since some of the operatives were trained for spy missions as well as for fighting prowess, he wouldn't have thought many—if any—could pass the rigorous physical tests. She was taller than Captain Nowon, though—only an inch shy of Ridge's own six-foot-one—and had the lean rangy look of an endurance runner. Her nametag read Kaika, and she wore captain's tabs on the collar of her uniform. Ridge expected a rigid attention stance and a snappy salute when she turned toward him, figuring a woman would have to be the model of military professionalism to be considered for the elite troops, but she gave him a perfunctory salute, followed by a handshake and a sultry smile that seemed out of place on a rawboned face without a speck of makeup softening the features.

"Colonel Zirkander, it's a real honor to have been chosen to work with you and your team."

Despite the sensual smile, she didn't hold the handshake longer than appropriate, nor did she do anything so brazen as giving him a head-to-toe look of consideration, such as he occasionally received from women. Still, something about the cant of her lips and the twinkle in her gray eyes said she knew how to have fun on the weekends. Her hair was short enough to be regulation without pins, but she managed to give it a flirty sway as she turned her head toward her comrade. Captain Nowon was in the middle of something that almost looked like an eye roll, but the movement was so slight, it might have been part of his perpetual scanning of the area around him—and above him.

"Well," Ridge said to Ort, whose scowl was definitely directed at him and not anyone else in the hangar, "I like her better than Therrik."

“I’ll bet,” Ort said.

“That’s not much of an accolade,” Kaika whispered to Nowon, and clasped her hands behind her back in a loose parade rest.

“Where have you been, Ridge?” Ort snapped. “Your elites are packed and here—” he waved toward a couple of duffel bags near the wall that, judging by the bulges, were loaded with weapons rather than clothing, “—and you haven’t even picked your team yet.”

“Sorry, General. Had a break-in at the house I had to check on, then I needed to make a quick stop for a necessary purchase.” Ridge rattled a brown paper bag in his hand.

“Break-in? What do you mean, break-in?”

Ridge shrugged. For all that he would love to hurl all of the army’s forces after the intruders, he wasn’t about to explain that someone was after Sardelle and her sword. That would raise far too many questions as to why. “I don’t know who was responsible, but I’ll be having a word with General Domhower about installation security. My house was demolished, and I’m not certain yet if anything was stolen.”

Ort’s scowl faded and was replaced with a faintly hopeful expression. “Was your couch irreparably damaged, by chance?”

“Nope, just tipped over.”

“A shame.”

Ridge arched his brows.

“About the break-in, I mean.”

“Careful, General. Make fun of my couch, and I won’t invite you to my next beer, blood, and brisk-ball summer gathering. You won’t get to take your shirt off and flex your muscles for Lieutenant Colonel Ostraker’s grandmother.”

“I still have a scar from your last gathering,” Ort grumbled.

“That’ll teach you to play drunk. The ground crew officers are feisty.”

“I think they just like an opportunity to throw an elbow into a general’s ribs.”

“That’s what feisty means, isn’t it?” Ridge asked.

Ort grimaced and rubbed his side.

“What’s in the bag?” Captain Kaika nodded toward the crinkled paper with curious eyes.

“Just something to watch over the house while I’m gone.” Ridge kept it shut. As captains, these two probably wouldn’t mock him to his face, but he didn’t need any rumors about his quirkiness floating around the intelligence units.

“Break-ins regardless, I need you to pick your team and get ready,” Ort said. “You’ll need to leave two hours before dawn if you want to time your arrival to cruise into Cofahre after dark but with most of the night still ahead of you. That’s why I told Therrik to send his gear and

team early, so you can get everything sorted out today."

"Yeah, yeah, got it." Ridge ignored Ort's customary bristling at the lack of honorifics and military courtesy, and waved to the captains. "Before I do anything else, I've got to tell you two that half of *that*—" he pointed to the lumpy duffels, "—will have to stay here."

"That is mission-essential gear, sir," Nowon said. His facial expression didn't change much, but his words came out rapidly. That probably passed for urgency from him.

"If it's half as heavy as it looks, it'll be too much weight. Even the two-seaters—*especially* the two-seaters—have very strict maximum loads, and if we don't pay attention to them, we'll be sailing over to Cofahre instead of flying. I'm already going to have to lose half of my ammunition to make room for all of Therrik's muscles." Ridge gave Ort a sour look before heading into the hangar.

"Find a lighter pilot to take him," Ort called after him.

Ridge waved his hand in acknowledgment but wasn't sure he could justify tormenting any of his people with that personality. He had Lieutenant Ahn in mind for the mission—she was the lightest of anyone on the squadron—but planned to assign Tolemek to her plane. He hadn't been joking when he had told Sardelle he couldn't see any of his other pilots flying across the Targenian Sea with Deathmaker in the seat behind, not without sixteen hours of tense shoulders and quiet suffocating terror.

It was a maintenance day, without any drills scheduled, so all of the Wolf and Tiger squadron fliers were in. Tiger squadron had their physical efficiency tests today, so Ridge's pilots had the building to themselves. The men and women had their checklists and technical manuals out as they ran through inspections of engines, wiring, and cabling, though they had all been glancing toward the door while he and the colonel talked. They had to be wondering why the elite troops were here and if the squadron was heading off on a mission. Ridge wasn't sure whether to feel bad for those who had to stay behind or not. He would be enthused about this adventure if *he* were in charge, but he had misgivings about Therrik.

No, he admitted to himself, he just didn't like Therrik and didn't want to work with him—much less *under* him. Most likely, he was a perfectly competent commander and very good at skulking around behind enemy lines and setting bombs or whatever these people did. Ridge glanced back, catching Nowon and Kaika with those duffels open, arguing over the contents. Several pistols and boxes of ammunition lay on the floor around the bags, while wires and bulging apparatuses poked out of the top. Bombs, yes, that appeared likely.

"Morning, sir," Lieutenant Ahn said as he approached. She glanced at the paper bag in his hand but didn't comment on it.

He should have left it by the door, but then one of those other officers might have peeked inside.

"Is it still morning?" Ridge asked. It seemed like he had been awake for hours and hours.

"I think so, sir."

"Up for a special mission to Cofahre?"

She hesitated, but then nodded firmly. "Always, sir."

He mulled over that hesitation for a moment. She hadn't said a word about what she had endured during her weeks of being a prisoner, but it couldn't have been anything pleasant. He had spent time in a Cofah prison himself a few years back. He doubted the guards had grown any more accommodating. Still, she had proven herself capable in battle three times since returning, and he didn't doubt that she could handle any lingering nightmares.

"If everything goes well, we'll slip in at night, drop off our cargo—" Ridge waved to the two captains, "—and then slip out again the next night, without ever getting into a battle. In fact, I think the king is hoping we won't get into battles. It's something of a spy mission, and there'll just be a handful of us going."

"Oh?" Ahn perked up, clearly intrigued. Or pleased to be picked for an elite task force.

"Yes, and I've been asked to talk Tolemek into coming. I thought you might be willing to help."

Her expression grew a little wry. "I assumed you were picking me for my unique skills, rather than who I'm sleeping with, but I suppose I want to go along if he's going, to keep him out of trouble."

Ridge stifled a grimace at the words "sleeping with." It was true that Tolemek had acted like a perfectly decent human being so far, but Ridge still felt protective toward Ahn, probably because he'd first met her when she was barely more than a kid, and some notorious pirate was *not* who he would have picked for her to fall in love with. The decision wasn't his, of course, and the fact that her dad loathed the idea almost made Ridge want to champion it. None of that was important at the moment, though.

"Oh, I have your unique skills in mind, trust me," he said. "Take your Mark 500 and plenty of ammunition for it. Just because we're *supposed* to get in and out without a fight doesn't mean we will. You know plans are worth spit until they've been put into action. And if our friends over there get into trouble, it's possible we'll have to get them out." Oh, and wouldn't he appreciate the expression on Therrik's face when Ridge's pilots were the ones to rescue him from some Cofah prison? "We're leaving two hours before dawn, so start packing. But I do want you to meet me at Tolemek's lab after lunch."

"You don't think he'll want to come along?" Ahn lowered her voice.

“Or are you afraid he’ll want to come along too badly? So he can get his sister? He *is* happy here, sir. He just wants to make sure she doesn’t have to stay in that place any longer than necessary.”

“I know. I understand. Unfortunately, I’m not going to be in command of the mission, but we’ll find out where she is exactly, and if it’s anywhere near and it’s at all possible…” Ridge finished with a shrug, not wanting to promise too much.

“Thank you, sir. He’ll appreciate you thinking of him. *I* appreciate it.”

Ridge gave her a parting nod and headed down the line toward the next pilot he had in mind for the mission. Ahn’s gratitude made him feel a little guilty, since he wouldn’t be thinking of going out of his way to help Tolemek if not for Sardelle and the promise she had made to the pirate.

As he passed Pimples, Beeline, and Crash, Ridge gave them quick nods and greetings, noting their hopeful expressions, but he didn’t stop. He could only take two more men, and he hadn’t been buttering Ahn’s toast—he truly wanted people with talents beyond flying for this. Talents that might be useful if he needed them. Besides, he needed to leave some good men for Major Pennith, who would command the squadron in his absence.

“Duck and Apex.” Ridge gestured to the two men at the end of the line of fliers. “Come see me.”

A wide grin split Duck’s face, and he thumped his fist on Apex’s shoulder as he ran past. He was twenty-five and would make a good captain once he settled down, but Lieutenant Wasley “Duck” Antilon still seemed more a kid than an officer. He and Pimples might have a few years on Ahn, but she always seemed the oldest of the group of young lieutenants.

Duck almost skidded in his hurry to meet Ridge and snap to attention. “Yes, sir?” Almost too tall to be a pilot, he had big ears, big feet, and a big grin that he always had to struggle to rein in. He wasn’t doing a good job of that at the moment.

Apex walked over, his stride more measured, his expression one of curiosity but not avid hope, like Duck’s. Though he was also a lieutenant, he was in his early thirties since he had come later than usual to the military, finishing eight years of university classes and two years studying fossils in the field before having his hometown of Tanglewood destroyed by pirates. More specifically, by Deathmaker’s biological agent. Ridge had been watching him since Tolemek had come to the city, but Apex was good at hiding his thoughts. He had seemed stiffer than usual around Ahn these last weeks, but to Ridge’s knowledge, he hadn’t confronted her or made a problem. Under any other circumstances, Ridge wouldn’t do something as foolish as

putting him on a team with Tolemek, but the man knew everything there was to know about dragon history. Sardelle knew a lot about dragons and history, too—Ridge still hadn't figured out if she had always been academically inclined, or if Referatu children had simply received more thorough educations than anyone else—but he still didn't know how he could bring her on the mission, especially if he wasn't in charge.

"Sir?" Apex asked, falling in beside Duck.

Ridge opened his brown bag and held it toward him. "The vendor promised this is an authentic Peruvashian Prosperity Dragon carved from the finest redwood burl. It's guaranteed to bring luck to my home. What's your professional opinion?"

Apex peered into the bag. "That the vendor saw you coming and knew colonels make good money."

Ridge snorted. "I only paid ten nucros for it."

Apex lifted his gaze to the flier at the front of the queue, where Ridge's little wooden dragon carving hung in the cockpit. "It looks heavy. You're not going to replace your current charm, are you?"

"Nah, this is for the house. It's been under assault of late."

"I see." Apex clasped his hands behind his back and refrained from saying his commander was a superstitious dolt. Good man.

"Any idea what dragon blood might be used for?" Ridge asked.

Apex's eyebrows rose. "Dragon blood was exceedingly difficult to acquire. There were cases of swords stained with dragon blood during the Rider Wars, and of minute quantities being scraped away for study, but that was fifteen hundred years ago, and science was primitive back then. Speculation ranged from the blood itself having healing properties to the possibility of it being an energy source. It was proven any number of times that the offspring of those who mated with dragons gained access to otherworldly or perhaps mental powers that normal humans couldn't tap into. Is this what you're referring to? Human blood mixed with dragon blood? If so, it's been nearly fifty generations since the last dragons were seen in the world, and the dilution factor means there's little difference now between a human who had a dragon ancestor and one who didn't."

"Yes, I've always wondered how those matings went," Ridge said, though in truth, he hadn't thought much about it until he had met Sardelle and she had explained that all sorcerers had a dragon ancestor somewhere in the family tree. "But what I'm actually asking about is what pure dragon blood might be used for now, because it sounds like the Cofah might have some."

"I don't see how that's possible, sir. It sounds like propaganda." Apex eyed the elite troops captains. "Unless we have some kind of proof? In which case I would be most intrigued to examine it. It can't

possibly be live, viable blood, but perhaps they've found some trace blood molecules in a fossilized mosquito or some such. If a mosquito could even pierce a dragon's scaled hide. I'd be skeptical, but I know there were some bigger blood-harvesting insects in past eras."

"The impression I got from my meeting was that this was live blood," Ridge said.

"Impossible. Unless they've got a live dragon too."

"That's… an interesting notion. Or a disturbing one. If anyone is going to have dragons on their side, I'd much prefer it be us rather than the Cofah. Still, you'd think that if there were dragons left in the world, one would have shown up now and then in the last millennium."

"Science hypothesizes that they went extinct due to changes in the atmosphere that came with the increased human presence in the world," Apex said. "The bonk-a-doos say the dragons got tired of this world and migrated to another one, though there's no evidence that dragons could fly through space or create portals to other planets."

Bonk-a-doos, indeed. "Is it possible the Cofah could have figured out a way to *create* dragon blood through some scientific or mechanical means? Like if they did find some fossilized remains?"

"*We* can't make blood, and we're at least as far along, scientifically and technologically speaking, as the Cofah."

Duck scratched his head. By now, Apex probably knew why he was being invited along, but Duck looked a little mystified.

"Wondering what your role is going to be on this mission, Duck?" Ridge asked.

"No, sir. Well, yes, sir." Duck lowered his hand. "But I got stuck on the idea of dragons and people making like jacks and mares in heat."

Apex tilted his head. "An inaccurate simile, since the offspring between a horse and a donkey is sterile. The human children born to those matings were perfectly viable, as evinced by the fact that people with dragon blood were born for centuries after."

Duck's face screwed up. "But how… I mean dragons are—" he stretched out his arms to their fullest spread, "—and people are…" He pulled his hands into encompass something much smaller.

Ridge smirked, but he eyed Apex as well. He was just as curious about the answer. He supposed Sardelle would know, but he had never thought to ask. Talk of magic and the origins of magic made him twitchy. He ought to put this whole conversation to bed and send these men off to pack.

"According to the histories, dragons could take human form," Apex said. "Like many other species, there were always far more male dragons born than female dragons, and only the strongest and most desirable males were taken as mates. Those who wanted offspring, or

were simply feeling randy, shape-changed and mated with other species. Not only humans. This all happened so long ago that it's difficult to prove any of it, mind you, but some of the rarer and quirkier species out there with inexplicable traits that border on the magical—such as unicorns, winged tigers, and flash apes—are believed to have come about due to dragon blood. Most of these creatures are nothing more than stuffed reproductions in museums now, having either been hunted to extinction or having had their blood diluted through the generations until the peculiar traits disappeared, but you still hear stories of them now and again, especially in the wilder and less explored areas of the world."

"My father brought a unicorn horn back from his travels," Ridge said.

"Now I'm imagining dragons and horses…" Duck shook his head. "Never mind."

"Apex, your knowledge could be important on this mission," Ridge said. "You up for an adventure into Cofahre?"

"Yes, sir."

"And, Duck? Can you forage and survive in some random Cofahre wilderness as well as you can here?"

"Ahh." Duck nodded, understanding his role finally. The kid had practically grown up with wolves, at least according to the stories he told, before his family had joined a farming community so their children could be properly educated. During an exercise the year before, he and three other soldiers had crashed in the swamps off the Temeron Keys, and Duck had kept everyone sheltered and fed until the team had been located. "Yes, sir. Reckon I can forage and survive just about everywhere. There's ways to test what's edible and what's not, even if you're in a new area."

"I hope we won't need your skills…" Ridge had no intention of having his team shot down deep into enemy territory, but he'd make a poor commander if he didn't plan for every contingency. "But I'd like to be able to call upon them just in case."

"Yes, sir. I'm happy to go along."

"Good. We're leaving in the morning. I'll have the ground crew prep the two-seaters. We'll all be flying an extra passenger." Ridge nodded toward the two captains.

"You've selected four pilots, sir," Apex observed. "Who else is coming?"

"There's an elite troops colonel that will be leading his men. And the fourth person… I'm going to go check to see if he's available." Ridge waved and hurried away before Apex could ask who that fourth person might be. Best to see if Tolemek wanted to come before worrying too much about personality—and history—conflicts.

Still, Ridge could feel Apex's eyes following him across the hangar as he walked away.

. . . . .

The receptionist in the research building pursed his lips in clear disapproval of the mud Ridge left on the white marble floor when he entered, or maybe at Ridge in general. His flight suit and leather jacket weren't uncommon wear in the city, but everyone walking in and out of doors up and down the hall wore white lab coats and tidy civilian suits. Mud-free footwear.

Lieutenant Ahn was leaning against the end of the receptionist's desk. Her boots looked as muddy as Ridge's, but there wasn't a line of prints leading from the door to her spot. The receptionist sighed and pushed something under his desk, eliciting a thunk. A door opened down the hallway, and something that looked vaguely like an upturned mop bucket with gears rolled out. Damp sponges between its wheels deployed, wiping the floor clean. Ridge stepped aside for it as soon as he realized it was on some kind of circuit that wouldn't be stopped for innocent bystanders.

"Tolemek's lab is this way, sir," Ahn said, pointing down the hall.

Ridge watched the cleaning contraption for a moment before joining her. "Should I be jealous that a notorious pirate and enemy of the nation works in a much fancier building than we do?"

"From what I've seen, the fancy toys are just distractions. The other day, I walked in on Tolemek using his mechanical spinner and some liquid gas to turn milk into ice cream."

"No wonder the king was excited to turn him into an ally." Ridge gave the sponge machine another wistful look before they turned into a stairwell and started climbing.

"You could get Wrench or Dantalos from Tiger Squadron to build you a self-propelling mop bucket if you were really motivated, sir."

"I'm not sure the minds that thought up an ambulatory beer dispenser for the break room could be trusted to create something as useful as a cleaning device."

"Maybe not." Ahn led him onto the second floor to a door with a frowning guard standing next to it. His shoulders were slouched, almost in a cringe. Odd. Was he that alarmed by Tolemek's reputation?

The guard straightened as soon as Ridge and Ahn approached. "Colonel Zirkander, sir." He glanced at the closed door. "Is… Deathmaker in trouble, sir?"

"I don't know. Is he not sharing his ice cream?"

A puzzled furrow creased the guard's brow. "I don't know, sir. I just mean… another officer. It *sounds* like he's in trouble." He frowned at

the door again. “He’s been decent to me. I know about his past, but I didn’t think he’d done anything to—”

Ahn pushed past the guard, a worried frown forming on her own face. She opened the door, and a wisp of smoke wafted out. Ridge hesitated, imagining some experiment gone awry and spilling poison into the air, but the guard had been worried *for* Tolemek, not because of him. Ahn rushed in without pausing, and Ridge’s heart jumped when a slam almost as loud as a gunshot came from the other side of the room.

Ridge strode in, slipping his pistol out of his holster. Towering equipment and cabinets loomed on either side of him, but he focused on the far side of the room, trying to figure out what had caused that noise. But smoke thickened the air, dulling the sunlight filtering in from the single window and dimming the influence of the gas lamps mounted on the walls.

“Tolemek?” Ahn asked.

“Get back, woman,” a man said. It wasn’t Tolemek, but Ridge recognized the voice. “Quit hiding, you pirate coward. Face me like a man, not a child full of tricks.”

“Colonel… Therrik?” Ridge asked. He lowered his pistol. Ahn had her own firearm out and hadn’t bothered lowering it yet.

Ridge stepped forward and pressed down on her forearm. “That’s our commander for our mission. Shooting him would be frowned upon by our superiors.”

“Tolemek, are you all right?” Ahn asked, her arm tense. She lowered the pistol but didn’t put it away.

“That depends on whether this… person is done assaulting me,” came the pirate’s voice from a corner of the room. It sounded like he was hunkered behind a lab station.

“Colonel Therrik,” Ridge said, hardening his voice—he knew Therrik wouldn’t be intimidated by him, but he wanted a serious response, not to be ignored. The colonel was visible in the smoke, his broad shoulders heaving, as if he’d run a sprint. Or been in a fight. His face was covered in soot, lined with sweat streaks. Or maybe those were tear streaks. “What are you doing here?”

“Getting information from this homicidal ass,” Therrik snarled.

“He barged in here, wanting to interrogate me,” Tolemek said.

“We don’t *need* information from him,” Ridge said slowly, not sure he understood Therrik’s intent. “We’re taking him with us so he can be a mobile resource for us. If he agrees to come, that is. Your method of enticing him to join our quest is lacking.”

Ahn pulled away from Ridge and walked toward the sound of Tolemek’s voice. She kept an eye on the colonel—she’d yet to holster that pistol.

Ridge wanted to warn her not to do anything to jeopardize her career, but Therrik was talking again.

"I'm not taking this hairy gorilla anywhere. He'll tell us what he knows about dragon blood, if I have to carve it out of him."

"Come close to me again, and the next grenade I throw will do a lot more than tear up your eyes," Tolemek said.

Therrik shifted, and Ridge spotted a big knife in his hand.

Seven gods, what was the man *doing*? "If you're looking for an expert on dragon blood," Ridge said, "I suggest you talk to Apex, one of my pilots. He studied archaeology and dragons specifically before joining the military. Tolemek is supposed to come along to analyze the Cofah lab and figure out what they're making. I sincerely doubt he can do that until he actually sees the lab." Of course, if Therrik and his team objected to Tolemek's presence, that might be the perfect time for Tolemek to slip away and find his sister. *Ridge* wouldn't want to go into an enemy scientist's lab without a scientist of his own to point out the booby traps, but Therrik didn't seem to share that feeling.

"We're *not* taking him with us," Therrik repeated. "Not on my team, and not on my mission. There's no way I'd trust that animal at my back, and you're a fool if you would, Zirkander. Get him back in his homeland, and he'll turn on us quicker than a cobra escaped from its cage."

"Anyone want to tell me about this mission I may or may not be going on?" Tolemek rose from behind the lab station, a ceramic oval device in his hand. He gestured for Ahn to join him, as if Therrik might attack her, and he intended to protect her as well as himself.

Ridge didn't think the colonel's propeller was that off kilter, but he took a few steps toward the man, anyway, lifting a placating hand.

"That's what I came to do," Ridge told Tolemek. "Why don't you let me handle the, ah, interrogation, Colonel? Your captains are already at the hangar. There was some debate over the packing list. They could probably use your advice."

Therrik glowered at Ridge, that long knife still clenched in his hand. "Sure, I'll let you and him conspire, then come along on my mission to Cofahre together. That's not insanity, not at all."

Ridge didn't know whether to fight Therrik's sarcasm with sarcasm of his own or to try to get to the bottom of it. What was the curmudgeon so worried about? It wasn't as if Tolemek had been working for the Cofahre a month before. He had been estranged from his homeland for years. Besides, he would be surrounded by military officers out there.

Therrik pointed at Ridge's face. "You may have the king where you want him, but some of us know the truth and aren't going to let you roam free much longer, not with some witch controlling you."

Uh, how had they jumped to Sardelle again? What exactly had Therrik been telling the king before and after Ridge had listened in on that conversation? And what did it have to do with Tolemek and the mission anyway?

"You can't be trusted any longer, Zirkander. It's not your fault that you were so weak-willed as to fall for some witch's wiles, but it won't be a problem much longer."

"What does that mean?" Ridge whispered, eyes locked with Therrik's. "You didn't have something to do with the break-in this morning, did you?" He doubted it, but there were a lot of people gunning for Sardelle all of the sudden. Was it possible they were all part of the same organization? "Or the explosion?"

Therrik managed to look confused and angry at the same time. "You'll find out."

Ridge clenched his fists. A threat toward him, he could handle—it wouldn't be the first. But threatening Sardelle? Oh, he knew she could handle trouble, too, but if some group of people—Therrik's intelligence buddies?—knew what she was, they might be prepared and come up with ways to hurt her. After all, as powerful as her people had been three hundred years ago, they had been destroyed by soldiers with bombs.

Therrik's gaze lowered to Ridge's fists, and a tight smile formed on his mouth. That challenge had returned to his eyes. Ridge knew it would be stupid to get into a fight with the man, but he was sorely tempted when Therrik stalked in his direction. He unclenched his fists and kept his hands at his sides. Therrik might be an ass, but Ridge doubted he would pummel a fellow officer without provocation. Just retired pirates.

As suspected, Therrik didn't lift a hand as he said, "See you in the morning, Zirkander." He jostled Ridge's shoulder as he angled toward the door. Even the simple brush was enough for Ridge to feel the mass of muscle beneath the colonel's sleeve, and he had to take a step to the side to brace himself. "I trust I won't see that *thing*—" Therrik jerked a thumb over his shoulder, "—standing next to your flier when I get there."

The guard in the hallway—who had doubtlessly been witness to this encounter—scurried out of Therrik's way as the colonel strode out. The door slammed shut.

"Actually he'll be standing next to Lieutenant Ahn's flier," Ridge said. He supposed it was cowardly to wait until after the door was shut to respond, but he didn't want to show his cards before he was ready to play them.

Tolemek gave Ahn a hug and walked out into the open. He had lost most of his pirate clothing, including the shark tooth necklace, spiked

bracers, and sleeveless vest he had been wearing when Ridge first met him, but he hadn't cut his goatee or the thick ropes of black hair that hung about his shoulders. Still, he was presentable in the white lab coat and black and grey civilian clothing beneath. Mostly presentable. At the moment, a split lip leaked blood onto the white coat, and he was squinting out of his left eye. He had definitely taken a couple of punches. What was Therrik thinking? Was the man truly that unbalanced? It was hard to explain an officer with twenty years in the military acting so erratically.

Ahn walked over to a sink and wetted a rag. "Healing salve?" she asked.

"There are a bunch of finished vials in that cabinet." Tolemek pointed.

Ridge leaned his hip against a lab station. He would leave the ministrations to Ahn. "So, Tolemek. Are you interested in taking a trip to Cofahre?"

"To get my sister?"

"To analyze a secret Cofah lab that our spies found. They supposedly have dragon blood and are using it to make weapons."

"Yes, I got the gist of the dragon blood problem." Tolemek scowled toward the closed door. "Who was that, anyway? He neglected to give me his name before he started hurling me against walls and lab stations."

Ahn returned to his side with the rag and a vial of greenish-gray gunk that looked about as appealing as thirty-year-old ration bars. She twitched a finger, and Tolemek lowered his face.

"*That*, should you choose to join us on this mission, is our commanding officer," Ridge said.

Tolemek's lips twisted into a displeased grimace. "Maybe I'll stay here."

"Ahn's going."

"Maybe I'll go."

Ridge smirked. "I'd make a joke about the tractability of those newly in love, but…"

"You're too busy being tractable for Sardelle?" Ahn asked, then tacked on a belated, "Sir." She was dabbing the green stuff on Tolemek's wounds with far more gentleness than anything other than her gun usually received from her.

"Oh, I'm way past being tractable and on the verge of doing something really stupid to make sure she's safe." Ridge was worried about Therrik's words and worried about what had happened to Sardelle this morning. She was being targeted by people who seemed to know who and what she was. Leaving her here while he went away on an extended mission… he couldn't do it. Nor did he want to simply

send her to his cabin. For one thing, she might not go—he certainly couldn't pretend to have any ownership of her or a right to give her orders. For another, these people already knew she was connected to him. His cabin wasn't a secret, nor was it a long distance out of the city. They would figure out to look there. On the other hand, she *was* interested in going to Cofahre…

"That woman can take care of herself," Tolemek said. "If you think she needs you to engage in stupidity on her behalf, you're delusional." Something about the way his eyebrows rose suggested he thought Ridge was delusional anyway. Enh, he wouldn't be the first to think so.

"Possibly so," Ridge said, "but I'm also thinking of the success of our mission. I'm a little concerned by the unpredictability of Fists as our team leader." He tapped his fingers on the cool granite surface of the lab station. "Tolemek, do you have any potions that could cause a man to lose consciousness for a time?"

"Potions? I'm not some witch stirring up a concoction over a cauldron, you know."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"He's an expert at knocking people out." Ahn gave him a fond smile.

Ridge tried not to shudder at the double implications of the word. He knew Ahn wasn't referencing Tanglewood, or anyone Tolemek might have killed with his potions, because she wouldn't beam up at a man who could take pride in such things; she didn't even approve of her father's career, and he usually killed criminals and thugs who deserved it.

"If you could give me something in pill form, that should work… extremely well." Ridge smiled as a plan solidified in his mind.

"A pill? Does this look like a pharmacy?"

"Definitely a pill," Ridge said, ignoring the sarcasm. "Maybe you could even give it an appealing flavor."

Tolemek made an exasperated noise.

Ahn was squinting suspiciously at Ridge. "What exactly are you planning, sir?"

"You two will both find out, providing you're at the hangar before dawn." Ridge smiled and headed for the door.

"My sister?" Tolemek asked.

Ridge stopped, his hand on the knob, and looked over his shoulder. Tolemek might come along simply because Ahn asked him, but he would be a truer ally if there was something more concrete in it for him. "How far is she from Brandenstone?" he asked, naming the closest city to the coordinates he had been given.

"A hundred and fifty miles."

Ridge hated to make promises he couldn't keep, but if his plan with the pill worked, keeping it shouldn't be that much of a problem. Keeping his career once he returned to Iskandia, that was more of a question.

"We'll get her," he said and walked out the door.

Chapter 4

After showing her temporary visitor's pass, Sardelle hurried through the gates of the army fort and toward the darkening residential streets that housed Ridge's little cottage. She clutched a heavy book to her hip, a historical tome that held information on secret orders of the past. In truth, she had no idea if the women who had been spying on her belonged to something as ominous or sophisticated as a "secret order," but the similar dress they all wore made her suspicious of organizational underpinnings. She wished she had seen one with her eyes, and not just her senses, so she could have spotted any pins or markings that might be used to identify them.

You think someone in a secret order would be so obvious? It wouldn't be very secret if they ran around advertising their existence with tattoos or glowing brooches.

Jaxi, have I mentioned how endearing your logic is?

Never, but you're young and irrational; you haven't yet learned to appreciate my unerring pragmatism.

Uh huh. Is Ridge home? Sardelle's library time had been interesting, and she intended to give this book a thorough reading, but she wanted to spend time with him before he left. She hadn't figured out yet whether she was going to stay here or head over to Cofahre herself, but either way, she wouldn't see him again for a while. That sense of loneliness that always lingered at the edge of her thoughts threatened to encroach. An image of a tousle-haired Ridge in bed with the sheets tangled around his bare chest *did* encroach.

He's there. I don't think he has amorous indulgences on his mind.

Why not? Whenever Sardelle had such matters in mind, she had yet to find Ridge in the mood to object to making them a reality.

Yes, yes, he's as horny as you are. But right now he's standing in the back yard, loading saddlebags onto a horse.

Er. Sardelle turned onto his street, jogged past the fountain, and cut into the side yard between Ridge's house and the one next door. The soggy snow clinging to the grass licked at her boots and the hem of her dress, but she ignored it. She rounded the corner to find the situation Jaxi had described, with Ridge near the back door,

tightening the packs on a sturdy mare. Horses weren't an uncommon sight in the city, but there were stables at the back of the fort. The horses weren't usually brought over to the residential streets.

"Does this mean you're kicking me out because my sword and I went to do research instead of cleaning your house?" Sardelle asked, angling across the yard toward Ridge. She glanced through the kitchen window. Most of the mess had already been cleaned up. How long had he been home? She should have left the library sooner.

"If I were kicking you out, I wouldn't supply you with a horse." Ridge patted the mare on the neck, then stepped away from the creature to greet her. He smiled that roguishly charming smile of his, the one that made her insides melt like the snow beneath the sun. Then he took her free hand, pulled her to him, and lowered his head for a kiss.

After Jaxi's warning, Sardelle hadn't expected amorous indulgences, and she almost dropped her book. But she leaned against him, happy to return the kiss. His lips were warm next to the chill of the night, and it wasn't long before she had forgotten the horse and was thinking of nothing more than ushering him inside.

When Ridge drew back, he didn't push open the door for them. He merely slid his hands down her back and gazed into her eyes, his face scant inches from hers. "Yup," he finally said, as if he were reaching some decision. "I want you with me in Cofahre." No matter what his orders from the king had been.

He didn't say that last sentence aloud, but this close, with his thoughts burning in his eyes, Sardelle felt the words ring in her head.

"Ridge," she whispered, "I'm delighted that kissing me makes you want to take me on adventures with you, but I've already upset the equilibrium of your life." She lifted a hand to the side of his face, running her thumb along his jaw. "I wouldn't forgive myself if you jeopardized your career. I…" She thought of her earlier musings, the knowledge that she could make life simpler for him by leaving, but all she wished to do was tug him into the bedroom. She didn't want to leave, that was certain. She wanted exactly what he was planning—whatever it was. She wanted to go with him.

"The kissing is nice," Ridge said, "but it's also the fact that you're jabbing me in the gut with a book and a sword hilt that gets me excited about taking you places." He grinned, unaware of or undaunted by her concerns. "That's not a combination I've gotten from many girls." As he spoke, he gazed into her eyes with a fondness that made her heart ache.

"I… oh."

Well, it's not your smooth, gilded tongue that has him excited.

Ssh.

Ridge cleared his throat and stepped back, though he only released her with one arm. The other seemed reluctant to leave her waist. The warmth of his hand seeped through her dress as he massaged her. “I’ve packed a horse for you, and if you’re willing to trust me, I need you to ride most of the night to the north, along the Pin-Kanth Highway. It’ll be dark, but it’s a smooth road. The horse won’t have any trouble following it. It’s about twenty miles to Monomy Bay, where you can wait for me to pick you up. You can sleep during our flight tomorrow. In fact, some people find sleeping makes flying with me more bearable.”

It took a moment for Sardelle to wrap her mind around this proposed adventure. Possibly because she was distracted by what his hand was doing. “And the reason I need to meet you there is because your superiors would be upset if they saw you loading me into your flier?”

“Among other things.” He gave her a lopsided smile. “You’ll go? I want you to come. I know you’ll be amazing, and I promised Tolemek we would get his sister—I may need some help making that happen. We won’t have enough room to bring her back on the fliers.”

Sardelle wasn’t sure if he had magic in mind or was simply thinking of her as an escort who could bring the girl back on a civilian freighter, but she didn’t care, either way. He wanted her to come… and she wanted to go. Hoping she wouldn’t regret the choice later, she stepped closer to him again for another kiss.

“I’ll go,” she whispered after a moment. “Thank you.”

“Good,” he murmured, his lips against hers, and most of his body against hers too.

“It’ll only take a few hours to get to that bay.”

“About six, I’d guess, given the darkness.”

Lighting the way so the horse could travel at a faster pace than a walk would be an easy matter for her. “When are you leaving?”

“Early,” he said, then caught on to what she was asking and grinned. “Eight hours. Time for—”

She cut him off with another kiss. “Good.”

. . . . .

An icy wind was blowing in off the sea, and it was almost three hours before dawn when Ridge walked off the tram at the top of the butte, but the dim, cold conditions couldn’t dampen his smile, a smile he was still wearing when he strolled into the hangar and proclaimed, “Good morning, troops,” to the four officers who had arrived before him. Captains Nowon and Kaika were there, sitting with their backs against the wall and playing cards, as well as Ahn and Duck, who were loading their gear into the two-seaters that had been driven to

the front of the hangar. Everyone turned or stood to give him a salute, but he waved them back to work.

"He's been cheerier than a cock in the mornings of late, hasn't he, Raptor?" Duck asked, not bothering to lower his voice.

"His archaeologist makes him perky," Ahn said, no sly winks or special emphasis on the word archaeologist. She rarely joined in with the squadron's banter, but when she did, her deliveries tended to be deadpan. She finished strapping her sniper rifle into the cockpit and climbed down.

"Where's *your* perky-maker?" Ridge had assumed Tolemek would spend the night with Ahn and that they would arrive together this morning.

"I left him last night trying to make a grape-flavored pill." Ahn was always on the grumpy side if she had to report to work before dawn, but she gave him a particularly irritated glare.

Which he deserved. "Ah. Well, you two will get to spend the entire day together at least."

"Sure. With me flying and him in the seat behind me. That'll be fun. Maybe he can braid my hair." Ahn tugged at one of the short wispy strands framing her face. "Food and water is loaded in all of the planes, sir. Since we had extra gear to load—" she waved at the two elite troops, "—we were careful with our weight. We only took on enough to get across the sea with a little to spare. We'll have to find more water in Cofahre."

"I've heard they have it there." Ridge started to walk away, but paused, wondering if there might be another reason for Ahn's grumpiness. "Did your father stop by last evening, by chance?"

Her eyebrows drew together. "No. Was he supposed to?"

"I might have suggested it. He knows you're heading off on a potentially dangerous mission." Ridge decided not to mention that Ahnsung knew about Tolemek too.

"So that means he came to see *you*." Ahn managed to look wistfully toward the ceiling and like she wanted to punch something at the same time. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't know why he can't either come talk to me or just go away completely."

"It's all right. He hardly even threatened me this time."

Ridge had meant it as a joke, but Ahn only glowered, making him wish he hadn't brought up the topic at all. He gave her a pat on the shoulder, then headed toward the lead flier, intending to secure his own duffel and double-check the guns and ammunition. The mundane routine would be good for his nerves. He might have left the bedroom in a good mood that morning, but his stomach was a tangle of knots, thanks to the deviation from the mission he had planned. Sardelle had left only a couple of hours ago, but had promised she would reach the

rendezvous point in time without letting the horse hurt itself on the dark road. He had a feeling he could have named a meeting point a thousand miles into Cofah territory, and she would have found a way to get there first too.

As Ridge walked past the two captains, he caught a snippet of the conversation Kaika and Nowon were engaged in, mostly Kaika. Nowon didn't seem to talk much unless he was delivering information in a briefing.

"…totally passionless. Here I am, heading off on a dangerous mission into enemy territory, and it was like he was thinking of someone else." Kaika played a card. "I know I was. You seen that blond fellow who works at the tea and massage parlor across from the base? The one whose shirt is always unbuttoned? You think all those muscles are from massaging people?"

Ridge managed to keep from gawking, not so much because of the material of the conversation, but because it was hard to imagine Nowon as a confidant for tales of one's sexual adventures. Indeed, Nowon merely played his card without responding. That didn't keep Kaika from giving Ridge a friendly wave, then continuing with the game—and her speculation.

After he loaded his duffel, Ridge trotted over to his usual flier, climbed up, and unhooked his wooden dragon from its spot in the cockpit. He would need every scrap of luck he could scrounge up this week. Sardelle had been amused—or maybe bemused—by the large prosperity dragon now placed prominently on a shelf above the wood stove, but she hadn't teased him about it. Later, he had caught a random smile on her face when she looked at it, but that was it.

The side door of the hangar opened, and Colonel Therrik strode in, a few snowflakes on his shoulders. His gaze darted around the hangar, lingering on Ahn for a second—was he looking for Tolemek?—before he turned to his own team. The captains abandoned their card game and scrambled to their feet, saluting him sharply. Therrik looked like he expected it. He returned the salute with snappy precision, two fingers touching the brim of his hat. Then he gave Ridge a challenging stare, as if he expected a salute from him too.

"Yeah, we're the same rank, donkey ass," Ridge muttered, turning his back to the man and climbing into the two-seater to hang his dragon. He did it quickly, not wanting some teasing remark from the colonel, though it was probably inevitable since they were riding in the same flier.

"Your people don't salute, Zirkander?" Therrik demanded.

Oh, so that was his problem. Ahn was carrying boxes of ration bars, and Duck was dangling head-down into his engine compartment so he probably hadn't noticed Therrik walking in.

“Not when they’re busy,” Ridge said.

“What an interesting style of leadership you practice.”

“Yes. Want to bring your gear over here so we can get you loaded up?” Not that he would actually need it… Ridge smiled amiably and climbed down the ladder pushed up to the cockpit.

Therrik dropped his duffel at the foot of the ladder, apparently expecting Ridge to load it for him. Before Ridge could decide if he wanted to comment, the side door opened with a gust of wind. Lieutenant Apex walked in, his face frostier than the winter air. The reason became apparent when Tolemek walked in behind him. Apex strode straight to his flier, snapping quick salutes to the senior officers and Colonel Therrik, but not making eye contact with anyone. Until he reached Ridge, at which point he gave an anguished you-betrayed-me-sir look along with his salute.

Ridge opened his mouth, an explanation on his lips, but he found himself rammed up against the side of his flier with his heels off the ground and fists tangled in his jacket. Therrik glared, his hard eyes no more than two inches away.

“What is *he* doing here, Zirkander?”

“Apex? He’s a solid pilot and knows a thing or two about dragons.”

“You *know* who I mean.” Therrik thrust him against the hull again.

Ridge was tall enough and solid enough that he didn’t usually get picked up and thrown around, but his attempt to loosen Therrik’s grip and escape was easily thwarted. They were about the same height, but the colonel had doubtlessly spent his whole life hurling people around. His smirk and dismissive snort said it would take a lot more than a wrist twist to elude him. He would probably be ready for groin attacks and eye gouges too. Aware of all the other officers watching, Ridge didn’t try again. He didn’t want to end up with his face smashed into the cement floor and Therrik on his back.

“The king wanted him,” Ridge said. “You were at that meeting. You know that. You have a problem with his personnel choices, you go talk to him.”

“*I’m* in command of this mission.”

“I didn’t say otherwise.” Ridge might have *thought* it, but he hadn’t said it.

“Sir,” Captain Kaika said, walking up. “We’ve loaded all of our gear. Do you have anything except your duffel that needs to go in?”

Captain Nowon joined her, though he spoke to Ridge rather than his commander. “Sir, the Ramisen Arm Lever would be an appropriate way to extricate yourself in this situation. If you wish, I can demonstrate it for you when we are on our mission.”

“Thanks,” Ridge said dryly. And how was that supposed to help him now?

But Therrik grunted and released him. “Just the duffel, Kaika.”

Therrik stalked away, leaving it on the floor. Tolemek was standing back, a couple of small bags of his own in his hands, and he watched the colonel warily. He had left his white coat at his lab and was back in the hide vest he had been wearing when Ridge first met him, albeit he wore a brown long-sleeve shirt beneath it this time. His trousers were different, too, a dark, sturdy material with numerous pockets. A hand drifted toward one of those pockets now, but the colonel walked out the door without moving toward him.

“I suppose there’s no point in hoping he’s decided he doesn’t want to come,” Ridge said.

Kaika picked up the colonel’s duffel. “Which flier, sir?”

“Mine.” Ridge jerked a thumb toward the rear seat.

“That’s either noble of you, or you have a masochistic streak.” She climbed the ladder to secure the bag.

“Both,” Nowon suggested.

Maybe it was simply a reflection of what he desired, but Ridge thought their tones and presence here meant they might not be Colonel Therrik fanatics.

“Would you miss him if he didn’t come?” he asked. Ridge wasn’t one to try and get officers to badmouth other officers, but it would be useful to know how much trouble he would have with these two if Therrik… disappeared. He also wanted to know how mission-critical the colonel was. In going through with his plan, would Ridge be jeopardizing everything? He had a hard time believing Sardelle couldn’t more than make up for whatever Therrik could offer the team, but still…

“Not me,” Kaika said, her legs sticking out of the second seat as she strapped down the pack. “We have a troubled past.”

Nowon looked up at her wriggling backside, then lifted his eyes toward the ceiling. “Kaika has a troubled past with *many* men. As for the colonel, he is largely superfluous, assigned to go with us because the king believed we needed an officer with more rank and experience.” Nowon wrinkled his nose. “I’ve spent time in Cofahre, and I know their culture, their history. I can slip unnoticed into any city and disappear, gathering information along the way. Hemelt, the man who was fatally wounded getting the location and details on the dragon blood laboratory, was my brother. He died in my arms. We trained together, came up through the ranks together. This should be *my* mission, my command.” For a moment, his expressionless face hardened, and his eyes burned with the intensity of an inferno.

Kaika dropped down beside him, and he found his forgettable blandness.

Given this new information, Ridge could see why the king might

not have wanted to put Nowon in charge. At best, it would be difficult for him to be dispassionate about the mission. At worst, he might risk the team for a chance to avenge his brother.

"What's your role on the team?" Ridge asked Kaika.

Kaika rested an elbow on her comrade's shoulder. "Nowon's lover." She waited for Ridge to arch his eyebrows before grinning and going on. "His wife, his mistress, his sister, his arms dealer, his bodyguard, his slave—I'm trying to forget about that one—and, oh, once we were circus performers together. That was fun. I've worked with other people, too, and on my own on occasion, but I like group projects."

"She gets distracted when she's on her own."

"Gathering intelligence from the locals is *not* a distraction."

"Even when it's done from their bedrooms?" Nowon asked.

"Especially then."

"Colonel Zirkander, Captain Kaika is also familiar with the Cofah culture and mannerisms. She can handle herself in a fight, but her true specialty is installing and disarming explosives."

Lieutenant Ahn had been helping Tolemek load his bags into the flier behind Ridge's, but she glanced over at this statement. Maybe she and Kaika could become good friends and chat about all the ways they knew how to kill people.

"And Therrik?" Ridge asked, lowering his voice, because the colonel had opened the door. He flicked a cigarette butt onto the ground outside before walking back inside. "What's his specialty?" Aside from being a gibbon's ass.

"Making people dead," Kaika said.

"Interrogation and combat," Nowon said. "What he lacks in mental acuity he makes up for with physical vigor."

Kaika smirked at the word vigor. Ridge decided he didn't want to imagine the situation where those two had been in bed together.

"Ready to go, sir," Apex said from the flier at the end of the line. He was pointedly not looking in Ridge's direction, since he would have had to look in Tolemek's direction for that too. Oh, this was going to be a happy team of people he had put together.

Since Kaika was a couple of inches taller than Nowon, Ridge doubted there was much of a weight difference between them. He arbitrarily waved for her to join Duck and for Nowon to join Apex, imagining the two men could have interesting conversations, or at least throw big words back and forth to each other. Duck's eyes brightened at Kaika's approach, perhaps an unforeseen perk for him.

Ridge walked over to Ahn and Tolemek. "I'm hoping you have something for me."

"Besides glares for making Tolemek stay up all night?" Ahn asked.

"You've already given me those."

“Here.” Tolemek pressed something into his hand, using his body to hide the exchange.

He was no dummy—he must know exactly what Ridge had planned.

“Safe flight,” he murmured to them, then returned to his own flier. Ridge waved readiness to his seat mate, and Therrik stalked in his direction. There would be no unforeseen perks for him.

“Let’s find some clouds,” he announced, then climbed into the cockpit and started the engine. The nerves in his stomach had returned with a vengeance. No one else here needed to start worrying until they neared Cofah space, but he didn’t have that luxury. He had twenty miles to subdue someone known for “making people dead,” and if he failed… Therrik wasn’t going to be happy about the attempt. If he didn’t fail, Therrik wouldn’t be happy about it, either. Nor would the king.

Chapter 5

Ridge couldn't actually feel Therrik breathing down his neck. It just seemed like it.

He guided the flier off the butte and into the dark sky above the harbor. A cold wind tugged at the wings, but it was nothing like the gales he had faced that night they fought off the pirates. He tugged his scarf up higher and adjusted his goggles, so the draft didn't swirl in to irritate his eyes. As he rose toward the clouds, he thumbed on the communication crystal mounted to the side of the stick. The people who had questioned Sardelle's invention—which he had lied about, claiming the crystals had been archaeological finds, similar to the energy sources that powered the fliers—had stopped doing so as soon as they had seen the usefulness of intra-squadron communications.

"Check in," Ridge said. "Any problems?"

Three "no, sir" replies came back to him.

"Good. Let's fly up the coast for a ways, check the caves and the other pirate spots before turning west."

Nobody questioned his command. It wasn't that odd of a decision—for all they knew, he had been ordered to make this check before heading out. Still, the deviation from the normal route increased the jangling of his nerves. If Sardelle hadn't been up there along the coast waiting for him, he might have backed out on his plan. Bending the rules was nothing new for him, but he only did it when he was certain he was right and that he was saving lives. He wasn't all that sure in this case. At a minimum, he was going against the king's wishes, and he would hear about that later.

As they flew north along the coast, Ridge dipped and weaved a little, flexing his wings. This wouldn't surprise anyone—he was known to do such things "for practice," which most of the squadron knew was his way of saying it was fun, and it didn't hurt anything.

"What are you doing, Zirkander?" Therrik growled.

He didn't sound like he was having fun. Good. Ridge had worried the colonel might have delighted in flying; he *hoped* the man had avoided a naval career because he got horribly seasick. And airsick.

"Just getting a feel for the two-seater," Ridge said in his most

professional tone and definitely not his I'm-doing-this-to-annoy-you tone. "They're not quite as maneuverable as the smaller fliers, and I haven't flown one for a while."

Ridge expected a sarcastic response, but Therrik didn't answer. Silence was akin to agreement, wasn't it?

Ridge smiled into his scarf, knowing Therrik couldn't see his face. He touched the crystal. "I thought I saw some smoke. I'm going to swing through Crazy Canyon to make sure there aren't any ships tucked into the little coves on the river. Maintain course. I'll catch up with you."

"Yes, sir," Apex and Duck said.

Ahn, who was flying off his port wing, looked over at him and made a circle with her thumb and index finger, the approval and all-is-well sign. It was always hard to read people's faces when they had their goggles on, but Ridge had a feeling she knew what he was doing. They probably all did. Oh, not the part where he hoped to replace Therrik with Sardelle, but the part where he wanted to make the colonel vomit all over himself.

Ridge pulled back on the stick to do a loop, turning himself and his passenger upside down before corkscrewing down to the canyon. He came out of the spin right before the river mouth, then banked hard to the right, taking them in. He weaved in and out, following the rugged walls, rising over trees, and dipping beneath natural arches that stretched from one side to the other over the river. It was darker than pitch, and he could scarcely *see* the river, but he had flown through this canyon so many times, he could have done it blindfolded. It was a popular training run.

"Zirkander." Therrik sounded sicker than a plague victim.

"Yes?" Ridge asked brightly.

"I'm going to—" Therrik broke off with a gasp and a gurgle that sounded very much like a man trying not to throw up. "I'm going to beat your ass into sawdust when we're back on the ground."

"That's not a very nice thing to say to the pilot who has your life in his hands." A cliff rose up out the darkness. Ridge pulled up hard, the wheels practically skimming the rock wall. One of the more impressive arches in the canyon loomed above them, leaving a small gap between it and the cliff. Ridge aimed for it, tilting the wings just so. They cruised through with inches to spare. Even without looking he knew Therrik was ducking, because everyone did.

"Gods kill you, Zirkander! I'm going to—" Therrik's threat ended in an abrupt gagging sound.

Ridge flew upside down again, taking them over the arch, then twisting back into the canyon, heading toward the mouth again.

"I guess I was wrong," Ridge announced. "All quiet in here. No

smoke." A pile of vomit perhaps, but no smoke. And Ridge would happily clean that out himself and consider the morning a victory.

"Good to know, sir," Ahn said dryly.

"I'm going to kill you," Therrik said weakly as they flew out of the canyon.

"Really? So early in the mission? People usually need to fly with me longer before they feel that way." Ridge pushed the engine to maximum so they could catch the others.

Therrik groaned.

"Listen, Colonel. I'll make a deal with you. You stop threatening me, and I'll give you something to settle your gut."

"Like what?" Therrik sounded suspicious. Not good. Had Ridge been too eager?

"Not everyone up here is a natural. We have tablets for airsickness." Ridge resisted the urge to weave back and forth more times to further sell Tolemek's pill. By now, Therrik was probably miserable just flying straight.

"Fine," the man growled.

Ridge looked down and pretended to fumble around in the metal first-aid kit snapped in beside his seat. Then he extended his arm over his shoulder, holding out the tablet. Thank Tolemek's crafty side, he had even wrapped it in foil packaging that made it look like something that had come out of a general mercantile rather than a lab.

Therrik took it. Ridge kept himself from craning his neck to look back and see if the man put it in his mouth. He did weave a little excessively as he returned to the formation, taking his position at point. Less than five miles to the meeting spot with Sardelle. Ridge doubted Tolemek's pill would work that quickly, but he could make some excuse and turn back, then catch up with the team again.

A couple of minutes passed with nothing more than the thrum of the propeller for company. Ridge tapped his thumb on the top of the stick, wanting to look back, but afraid Therrik would be back there, glaring at him, and would get suspicious at being checked on.

He caught Ahn looking in his direction and groped for a way to ask her if anything strange was going on with his passenger. She either figured out what he wanted, or made the observation of her own accord.

"I guess Crazy Canyon didn't live up to its name, sir. Colonel Therrik looks bored. Actually, he looks like he's taking a nap."

Ridge twisted in his seat to check. Ah, yes, it had worked. The glow of the energy source in the rear showed Therrik slumped down in his seat, his head against the side of the flier. Ugh, he *had* vomited all over himself. Most people tried to stick their heads over the side at

least…

"He's actually sick," Ridge said, wishing the communication devices allowed him to single Ahn out for his message. Unfortunately everyone would hear it, including Therrik's two captains, so he had to make this sound plausible. "I don't think he has the stomach for an ocean crossing. I'm going to take him back. Continue on course, everyone. I'll catch up." He touched the crystal again to dull its glow —and turn it off. He didn't want to field questions from Kaika or Nowon until it was far too late for them to do anything about the situation.

Ridge dropped out of the formation and turned for land again. He imagined Duck, Ahn, and Apex sharing our-commander-has-gone-crazy looks. He wondered if he had. If Sardelle were not in his life, offering herself as an intriguing alternative ally for this mission, he would have simply dealt with command under Therrik. Probably. Maybe. Enh, he might have arranged to accidentally leave the colonel behind anyway. Working with someone so volatile would be dangerous to everyone.

"Sure, Ridge, keep telling yourself that." Sighing, he steered for the dark shoreline, the whites of the waves breaking in Monomy Bay.

Dawn was still a ways off, but he had running lights. He could make the landing on the highway, however dark and empty it was.

An orange glow flared below, and he flinched, alarmed to find someone on his chosen runway. Someone who might catch him at this duplicitous exchange. Then the logical part of his mind caught up with his wild thoughts. If Sardelle could take on an enemy shaman and win, she could surely light up the highway for him.

Ridge aimed for the flat road, the stones black and wet from intermittent precipitation. His usual flier required room for landing and taking off, but the two-seaters, designed for flying important people around the continent, had thrusters and could perch on rooftops, cliffs, and even vessels at sea. He activated those thrusters to come down lightly in front of the light source, what turned out to be a ball of swirling orange flame. It lit the surrounding landscape—fields of high grass with cliffs in one direction and the sand and sea in the other—with its soft glow. To some distant observer, it might appear as a torch, a particularly effective torch.

Ridge lifted his goggles and spotted a familiar horse in the grass with Sardelle standing next to it, holding its reins and keeping it from shying away from the flier. He cut off the engine, unstrapped his harness, and checked his passenger. He didn't know how long Tolemek's pill would last, but Therrik was still snoozing. Good. Ridge didn't want a confrontation, especially one he couldn't win. Sardelle could probably wave her hand and save him, but needing to have

one's balls extricated from the dragon's maw was no way to impress one's lady. As it was, levering Therrik's two-hundred-odd-pounds out of the seat and to the ground wouldn't be easy.

"Good morning, Sardelle." Ridge removed his cap, pressed it to his chest, and gave her a little bow, then clambered out of the cockpit to unstrap the colonel. He left his gloves on, since vomit was splattered onto the harness. Speaking of things that wouldn't impress a lady…

"Good morning, Ridge. It's been so long since I've seen you."

"Terribly long. Have you been pining with loneliness?"

"Most assuredly."

With the propeller noise fading, a noshing sound reached his ears. The horse was munching an apple out of Sardelle's hand. The mare wasn't hot and lathered after its swift trip up the coast.

"Lift with your legs, not your back," Ridge muttered and hauled Therrik out of the seat. He rolled him over the edge of the flier, keeping a hold of his belt, so he wouldn't crash down, head first. Back straining, he lowered the bulky man by the belt. It turned out even his butt was solid muscle. Maybe that was what had once drawn Captain Kaika. Ridge didn't let go until the colonel was within three feet of the ground. That was as far as he could reach. At that point, he dropped Therrik, doing his best to keep the man's head from hitting the stone, even if a few cracks to the skull might improve his personality. Ridge hopped down and rolled the colonel to the side of the highway, so he wouldn't risk hitting him during the takeoff—and so any early morning donkey carts wouldn't run over him. Therrik was going to be irked enough without waking up with hoofmarks on his face.

"Do you need help with anything?" Sardelle asked.

"No, thank you. Actually, can you bring the mare over here? Maybe we can find something to tie her reins to. The colonel might be slightly less murderous if there's a horse waiting to take him home."

"She'll wait."

"Without being tied?" It was an army horse, and Ridge hadn't worked with it enough to know what it had been trained to do. He was certain Sardelle had never seen it before that night.

"Yes."

"Discussed it, did you?" Ridge was done with the colonel and stepped back onto the road, wiping moisture and grass off his hands. "I didn't think you were one of those sorceresses who specialized in working with animals." Until he had met Sardelle, he hadn't even known there *were* sorceresses who specialized in animals, speaking with them telepathically and such.

"I'm not, but she's an amenable soul." Sardelle led the mare over to the colonel, stroked its neck a few times, and gazed into its big dark eyes for a moment.

Ridge decided to find the situation precious and definitely not creepy.

Sardelle released the reins and stepped out onto the highway beside him, bringing with her the saddlebags he had packed. Instead of one of her usual dresses, she wore dark leathers that would be appropriate for skulking around in forests or cities at night. They were form-fitting and drew attention to her attractive figure, even in the poor light. She also wore boots, her sword, and a fur-lined cloak appropriate for the chill weather. She carried a small bag, destroying all the tales proclaiming a woman's inability to pack light. Maybe she could magic more things into existence if she needed them.

"Seems a shame to leave her here with such a non-amenable soul," Ridge said.

"I trust you'll explain that on the way across the ocean."

"Explaining his soul might be difficult." Ridge waved her over to the flier, then crouched and linked his fingers to offer her a boost up.

"His presence alongside the road is what I'm more curious about." She stepped into his hands and let him boost her into the flier. She was a lot lighter than Therrik. And her backside was a lot more pleasant to look at. He hadn't made a mistake. He hadn't. And if he had… he would find a way to make it right. "Ridge… is this vomitus on the seat?"

"Er, possibly." He winced. Why hadn't he thought to wipe the seat and toss that gunk over the side?

"I knew flying with you would be an adventure."

"I'll try to make the ride smoother for you." Ridge jumped, caught the edge of the cockpit, and pulled himself up.

"Now, now, don't make promises you can't keep." Sardelle sat in the seat, but not before Ridge saw that it was cleaner than it had been before Therrik climbed in back at the hangar, with even the harness free of detritus.

"Yes, ma'am." Ridge flipped a couple of switches, and they were soon off.

. . . . .

"Nice of you to rejoin us, sir," came Lieutenant Ahn's voice over the communication crystal.

Sardelle, settled in the seat behind Ridge, smiled, pleased the pilots were using the devices she had made. At least *some*body appreciated her presence in the city, or what she could make anyway.

Except they don't think you made them, remember?

I know, but perhaps someday the truth can be revealed.

Before they succeed in hanging, drowning, or otherwise slaying you, let's hope.

That's the plan, Jaxi.

There's a plan? I had no idea.

It's in its formative stages.

"We can't help but notice Colonel Therrik got prettier while you were gone, sir," a male pilot with a country drawl said. That must be Lieutenant Duck. Ridge had told her who he had selected for the mission—and that the other pilot, Apex, was an academic who would be too busy being frosty about Tolemek's presence to chat much.

At first, Ridge didn't respond to this ribbing, and Sardelle wondered if he would. As the commander, he shouldn't have to explain himself, but then again, if his people believed he was defying orders and doing something that would jeopardize the mission, they might have the right to question him. She wasn't sure what the modern regulations stated. The Iskandian Guard had required absolute obedience to one's superior officers, no matter what, but she had heard Ridge mention more than once a soldier's duty to question unlawful orders. Of course, he might have simply been justifying his own habit of questioning everything.

Ridge finally said, "Due to his extreme illness, Colonel Therrik has been replaced with a civilian expert." He didn't mention *what* she was an expert in.

"Funny how ill people get when they're taken through Crazy Canyon at top speed," Duck said. His words were followed by a muffled chortle, doubtlessly covered with his scarf. At least one of the pilots didn't seem that concerned with the switch.

Sardelle stretched her senses toward the three other fliers, trying to get a feel for how everyone else felt. Since she already knew Ahn and Tolemek, they were easy to identify and read: apparently Tolemek had known this was coming for he was neither surprised, nor alarmed. Ahn was concerned that Ridge had done something that could end his career, but she wouldn't say anything, not when he had once stepped in to protect *her* and risked his career doing so. Sardelle picked up on the bubbly personality of Lieutenant Duck in the next flier over, and even if it wasn't respectful, immediately thought of him as a cheerful young dog, happy to have been taken along on an adventure and not overly worried about where they were going or what was happening along the way. A woman sat behind him—this had to be one of the elite troops Ridge had mentioned—wearing numerous weapons with a duffel full of more weapons, tools, and incendiary devices strapped down at her feet. She had a book clenched in her lap, the wind whipping at the pages, but she was gazing into the sky, which had grown a few shades lighter. She seemed to be considering the situation before coming to a judgment. The last flier held Lieutenant Apex and another man, the other elite soldier presumably. He was

guarded, his personality difficult to decipher without digging deeper, and she wouldn't intrude by attempting to do so. The lieutenant was another matter. When Sardelle brushed against his aura, she drew back at the hatred roiling off him. That couldn't be for Ridge, could it? His pilots all seemed to love him.

Look closer, Jaxi suggested. *His family is from Tanglewood.*

Ah. Yes, Apex wasn't glaring at Ridge but looking toward the back of Ahn's flier now and then, toward Tolemek. He was keeping his face neutral, but murderous thoughts of revenge seeped from his aura.

He wants to find a way to ensure Tolemek doesn't return from this mission.

Yes, I see that now. Sardelle plucked away a strand of hair that the wind had whipped into her eyes, glad she had guessed right and pulled most of it into a tight braid. *Ridge doesn't know, does he?*

He knows. Apex is a dragon expert.

Sardelle slumped back into her seat. All the trouble Ridge was choosing for himself for this mission. And would the king even appreciate his efforts? Or had he condemned himself by getting rid of that colonel? And by choosing to bring her?

"Are you now placing yourself in command of the ground incursion, Colonel?" the woman asked, her voice distant and raised to be heard over the wind since the only communications crystals were in front of the pilots' seats.

"No, Kaika," Ridge said. "It's your and Nowon's mission. If you need more manpower, someone to replace Therrik in a combat situation, I've chosen people whose talents may be useful and who are, pardon my bias, probably more versatile than your colonel. And Tolemek could be invaluable to you if there's anything tricky in that lab."

A moment passed before anyone responded, but the two elite officers gave each other long looks from the back seats of their respective fliers.

"I believe Kaika and I would prefer to pursue this mission on our own," the male passenger—that must be Nowon—said, his voice equally distorted by the wind. "We've worked together often, and incorporating another person could create more complications than solutions. We will discuss it further when we arrive at our destination."

"Understood," Ridge said. "When we land, we can let you know everyone's specialties in case you change your mind. I'm probably the only one here who's only good at flying and shooting things."

"Thank you, Colonel."

Now it was Tolemek's turn to give Ridge a long look, though Ridge wasn't looking back in his direction. Tolemek doubtlessly wanted to

go look for his sister, and if the special unit didn't want him, it might be the perfect opportunity for him to slip away.

It sounded like the unit didn't want *her,* either, not that they knew about her abilities. Sardelle wondered whether Ridge had been including her in that line about sharing everyone's specialties. She wouldn't be averse to helping the Iskandian military, as she once had, but it would mean revealing what she could do. It might not matter at this point, given that quite a few people had somehow figured it out—including those women spying on her and attempting to bury her in caved-in basements. Still, she wanted to discuss it with Ridge before revealing her talents and being sent off with two strangers. Fulfilling her promise to Tolemek was her priority here.

Perhaps you could have discussed it last night if you hadn't been bouncing around in bed like rutting bonobos in the treetops.

Sardelle had thought she was past the point of being embarrassed by any of Jaxi's commentary, but she found herself blushing and sinking lower in the seat. Probably because she was right.

Of course I'm right. I'm always right. I've been in this sword for a long time. It's made me venerable and wise.

You sound like a dragon. Or someone who thinks she's a dragon.

I always wanted to meet a dragon. They were long gone even when I was alive.

Maybe not all of them. If the Cofah truly have dragon blood, it came from somewhere. Sardelle smiled, remembering the time Jaxi had admitted she had read oodles and oodles of romance stories involving humans falling in love with dragons, and vice versa, as a girl. That would have been before the printing press was invented, but the Referatu had used magic to make copies, and fiction as well as non-fiction had always been well-represented in the libraries in Galmok Mountain. Perhaps that infatuation was part of the reason she hadn't found a human boy to have a relationship with before it was too late.

No… I was pimple-faced, pig-tailed, and precocious. The human boys wanted nothing to do with me. Also, I could fry their balls off with a thought. I think that intimidated some of them.

Perhaps it was more the fact that you made that known… frequently. Sardelle hadn't been there, but she knew Jaxi well enough to believe her guess accurate. The haughty sniff she got by way of a response confirmed it.

Ridge looked back at her, a challenge since she was positioned directly behind him. "Are you doing all right back there?" he called.

Only a couple of feet separated them, but the propeller's constant drone made it difficult to converse, and the wind rushing past would have stolen his words if he had spoken any more softly. The wind was trying to steal his scarf, too, or at least its end—it had a tendency to

escape his coat and whip free behind him. She had almost taken a fringe in the eye a couple of times. It wasn't the ideal spot for a heart-to-heart discussion, but she had the feeling the mission would start as soon as they landed, and she had questions that she hadn't, for reasons Jaxi had noted, asked the night before.

"Yes," she said.

Ridge touched his ear, and she leaned forward and repeated herself.

"Do you want a scarf or goggles?" he asked. "I brought extras."

"I'm fine." By slumping in the seat, keeping her cloak wrapped around her body, and using him as a wind block, she found the ever-present gale tolerable. It was amazing how much colder it was up there, partially from the wind they created and partially from the altitude. The breadth of the ocean made it hard to tell how far up they were, but they definitely weren't in danger of being shot at from below if they should pass an enemy warship. She wondered if the Iskandians had considered enclosing their cockpits with glass—perhaps it would be too fragile for the pressures of flying and combat. "How far until we reach Cofahre?"

"Not until after dark."

Considering it would take a sailing ship weeks, that was impressive speed, but she did find herself curious about what happened when the inevitable occurred and she had to use the latrine. An image of herself perched on the side with her rear end hanging over the edge of the flier came to mind. She couldn't imagine that not being messy. "What happens when the need to engage in bodily functions makes itself known?"

Ridge glanced back, touching his ear again.

Sardelle sighed and leaned forward. "Where do you pee?" This was a frustrating way to talk, especially when she had an alternative. Could she convince him to give it a try?

This time he grinned when he glanced back. "There's a tube under the seat. Most of us just don't drink or eat much when we're up here."

A tube? That didn't sound female friendly. Of all the problems she had used magic to solve, she had never thought that would be one.

"Ridge?" Sardelle checked to make sure the communication crystal wasn't transmitting, then laid a hand on his shoulder. "I know talk of magic makes you uneasy, but would you consider…" Hm, how to phrase this? He would understand the term telepathy, she was certain, but might object to it on principle. "You know how I talk to Jaxi? In my mind? Is that something you would be comfortable with? Or could become comfortable with? In situations such as this, it would be convenient. Also when we wish to converse with each other in private and there are other people around." She bit her lip to keep from going

on with her list of benefits.

He hadn't looked back at her again, and there was nothing exciting ahead of the flier that would require his attention, so he was either thinking about it, searching for a way to reject it, or hadn't heard her that clearly. No, he would have touched his ear if that had been the case. He must have gotten the gist.

"What would I have to do?" he finally asked over his shoulder.

"Nothing. Just… don't get startled and let your flier drop out of the sky."

He gave her a circle hand sign and said something that sounded like, "I don't even do that when people are shooting at me."

Sardelle waited a few seconds, letting him grow more accustomed to the idea, and left her hand on his shoulder. *Thank you. It's quieter in here.*

Ridge glanced back, like he might be about to answer out loud, but he closed his mouth, giving her a thoughtful look instead. *You haven't been in here long, if you think that.* He raised his eyebrows. *Did you hear that?*

She squeezed his shoulder. *Yes.*

Huh.

I'll have to be monitoring you—know you want to speak—for me to 'hear' you, but all you have to do is think the words to respond to me. I know you're not comfortable with magic or anything associated with sorcerers, so we can reserve this for emergencies, or flying, if you like.

It's all right. Not exactly a ringing endorsement. But then he added, *I want to be comfortable with you—what you can do. I just have to get used to things. Sometimes that takes a while. I'm not as young as I act, you know.*

Perhaps not, but I've noticed your commanding officers are all the ones with the gray hair.

Someday, I'll have to command someone as obnoxious as I am, and my hair will turn white overnight.

You'll still be handsome.

Ugh, Jaxi thought. *This is so cloyingly sweet, I may gag.*

At first, Sardelle assumed the interjection was for her mind alone, but Ridge's shoulders stiffened. *Jaxi!* She groaned.

What?

If you start talking to him about bonobos, I'm going to drop you into the ocean.

Highly doubtful.

That's… the sword, right? You, ah, didn't mention that it would be speaking to me too. Fortunately, Ridge only sounded mildly alarmed. Or maybe mildly affronted.

I didn't invite her to do so, but she's rude.

Jaxi made a rude noise in her mind. *If you don't correct him on calling me an* it*, I'm going to make bonobo noises in his mind all night long the next time you two are rutting.*

Sardelle stared at the back of Ridge's head, afraid Jaxi had shared that bit of disrespect with him as well, but he didn't turn around and gape at her in disbelief.

I'm not that *tactless. Not on first contact anyway. Although technically I spoke to him before, to warn him people were trying to blow you up.*

For future reference, Ridge, Jaxi is a she, and has threatened to show you her truly tactless side if you call her an it. Also, I apologize for the interruption. I'm used to her waltzing about in my head, but I know it can be startling to others. You can compare notes with Tolemek if you wish.

A couple of moments passed without a response from Ridge. Sardelle flexed her fingers in her gloves, hoping this wasn't too much for him. She would have preferred to wait to bring in Jaxi. Or perhaps never to have brought in Jaxi.

Oh, sure, keep him for yourself. Do you have any idea how few people I dare communicate with? It's a lonely existence these days.

You can talk to some of our Cofah enemies when we arrive, ideally while they're thinking about shooting at us.

I guess if Tolemek can handle a talking sword, I can too, Ridge thought. *But it's a little… daunting to realize she's like a real person and that she knows what I'm thinking and saying to you when I've never really met her.*

Thinking and saying? Tell him it doesn't stop there. I even know about that thing he does with his tongue that you like.

Sardelle dropped her chin to her chest with a groan. To think, when she had been staying up all night with Ridge, then riding out on the horse, she had thought she could nap during this flight. *I'm not telling him that, and you better not, either.*

Fine. You can tell him that I appreciate him already elevating me to "like a real person." That's quick progress considering I was an "it" thirty seconds ago.

I'd actually like to finish this conversation with him in private, if you don't mind. And not discuss you with him at this time. Someday, when you find your dragon lover, I'll stay out of your relationship.

A hollow promise, given the odds of finding a dragon.

Well, maybe you'll find another soulblade who adores your scintillating personality. There must be some of those still around. Sardelle had no idea how they might actually have a relationship that had anything to do with tongues, but with two powerful souls, who knew what was possible? Dragons had been known for shape-shifting, and she remembered a few legends about early soulblades having the power to do the same, though she had never seen that happen in her own

lifetime. Maybe legend was all it was.

I'd have to do some research. It's not anything I studied or read much about as a kid. Jaxi sounded vaguely intrigued.

Good, she had something to think about while Sardelle finished her original conversation.

Ridge looked over his shoulder. "Did you hear that last one?"

Yes, sorry, I was trying to arrange for a more private conversation for us. Sardelle groped for a politic way to say that Jaxi came with her and that was just how it was. But she hadn't told him that up front, and it seemed unfair to foist it on him now. Besides, she didn't want to risk it being too much for him to handle. With time, he ought to be able to get used to the idea, but maybe this had been a mistake. Maybe this would all be too weird for him.

You're not giving him enough credit, Jaxi suggested.

I can understand your discomfort, Sardelle told Ridge. *Even having known about soulblades for my whole life, it took me a long time to get used to having someone practically living in my head when Jaxi and I first bonded. She comments on everything from my sex life to my dietary choices to my latrine experiences.*

Yeah? What's she think of the tube?

Though she was truly worried about what Ridge would think of this new experience, she couldn't help but laugh at his question. She hoped the appearance of his humor meant he wasn't *too* disturbed by any of this. *Oddly, she didn't comment on that one. She's probably holding back until I make a mess attempting to use it.*

Yes, Jaxi thought.

Maybe the experience will inspire you to invent some more ancient archaeological devices for my squadron. Your people used to ride dragons in the old days, didn't they? Maybe they had something more sophisticated than a tube.

I believe their flights were short. Sardelle lifted her hand from Ridge's shoulder to a tentative touch of his cheek. She was wearing gloves, so it probably wasn't that endearing of a gesture, but she wanted to let him know… she didn't know what, really. That she cared. That she understood this was strange for him. *Does this latrine banter mean you've gotten past the oddness of telepathy and sentient swords, or that you're focusing on a lighter subject to avoid dealing with it?*

He chewed on her question before answering it. *Can it be some of both?*

Yes.

He clasped her hand in his and held it for a moment before letting go.

Sardelle leaned back in her seat. *The reason I wanted to talk like this is I was wondering if you were planning to use me on your mission here.*

He glanced back at her, and she sensed his confusion.

When you explain to those two captains what your people can do and ask them if they want to take any of us along with them on the infiltration, are you thinking they should know about me and what I can do?

No. Of course not. I'm not telling anyone your secrets, not when it could get you killed.

I thought you might have decided that since I'm being targeted already… the secret was already out.

If it is, it's not widely out. But no, none of that. You wanted to fulfill your promise to Tolemek, right? Find his sister? That's why I'm bringing you. And him too. Oh, sure, I'm hoping your memories and knowledge might be useful if our elite troops bring back something kooky and inexplicable—or something that would be too dangerous to fly home with—but as soon as we land, I was planning to send you two off to find that sanitarium. You should have time while Nowon and Kaika are infiltrating that lab.

Now it was Sardelle's turn to take some time digesting his words. *You mean you're risking your career by dumping that colonel all so we can get Tolemek's sister?* She could have done that on her own without his sacrifice. Granted, she wouldn't have an easy time navigating Cofahre alone, but she would never have asked him for this.

I'd be lying if I didn't say I also had the thought that it'd be nice to have you—and your snarky glowing sword—there if a flock of birds flies into the propeller during this mission. I have a hunch this is going to be more challenging than the king or Nowon thinks, and I had a bad feeling about Therrik too. Not just because he was fantasizing about shoving my face into a meat grinder. Not only *because of that, anyway. He seemed… I don't know. It was strange that he showed up at Tolemek's lab and started threatening him. It was strange, too, that he knew about you. We're not in the same unit, and we'd never talked before meeting with the king. I'll admit I'm well known in the military and in the capital, but I haven't known you long enough for anyone except close friends and colleagues to associate you with me.*

Should you have voiced those concerns to the king or your General Ort before taking the initiative of drugging the man and dumping him out of your flier?

Of course not. Didn't Referatu children have the same rule as regular Iskandian children have?

Sardelle squinted at the back of his head. *Which rule is that?*

It's easier to receive forgiveness later if you didn't first ask for permission and get denied.

Ah. That sounds vaguely familiar. The logic of ten-year-olds.

And pilots. Now, sit back and enjoy the flight. If you want to sleep, I'll let you know when we're close to Cofahre.

She leaned her head against the back of the seat, resolving to follow his suggestion, though she found herself wondering if she might do more on the continent than help locate Tolemek's sister. Maybe she could find a way to prove herself on this mission. She didn't think she needed to prove herself to Ridge, but if the Iskandian king, who apparently already knew about her, found out she could be an asset… maybe she could, one action at a time, clear the image of the Referatu and cut a trail for any other gifted people in the country. It would be much easier to find and train new students if she and they didn't have to spend their lives camouflaging their talents.

"One step at a time," she whispered.

Chapter 6

Ridge yawned and wished he had some coffee. The sun had dipped below the horizon, and darkness was returning. The squadron had turned to the northwest, following the Cofahre shoreline at a distance, a long distance. They were up high, skimming through the clouds, and when land came into sight, it was a faint smudge on the horizon. The encroaching darkness would camouflage them as much as the clouds, but the last thing they wanted was for an overly assiduous lighthouse worker or a sailor in a crow's nest to spot them.

He turned in his seat and called, "Sardelle?"

She had taken his advice and slept most of the morning, then read in the afternoon, and was dozing again now, the book she had borrowed from the library in her lap. She, at least, would be fresh when they arrived. He and his pilots would need to find a spot to rest after the early morning and the long flight. They had detoured twice to avoid freighters and pirate airships in the distance. He didn't think they had been seen, but it had definitely kept them alert to their surroundings.

Ridge couldn't reach farther than her knee without unbuckling his harness, but it was enough. Her blue eyes opened, focusing on him immediately.

"We're almost there." He wondered if she would respond in his mind. He hadn't found their mental conversation as disturbing as he might have expected—probably because it was her and not some stranger—but having the sword pop into his thoughts… *That* had been bizarre. Even though Sardelle had alluded to having some kind of relationship with it, it had never occurred to him that *it* might be a *she* and have the personality, intelligence, and sarcasm of a human being.

Sardelle peered through the clouds to the west. *We're cutting inland over the Alteron Steppes?*

For some reason, Ridge hadn't expected her to be familiar with the area. He didn't know why. She had probably been here when she had been working with the Iskandian army of old. Maybe because she talked so little of her old life that he didn't know what to expect from her past.

"Yes, it's—" He switched to thinking his words, figuring she might expect that now. *It's the logical place, since the mountains are to the north and the desert to the south. It's not a populous area.*

No, it never was. Horrible dust storms in addition to poor soil. And you can talk to me in whatever way is comfortable to you. She rubbed her face and wiped her mouth—afraid she had been drooling in her sleep? He hadn't caught her at it yet, but even if she had been… it would be a mild offense compared to what Therrik had done in that seat.

Good. We're going to cut for land soon. I wanted to warn you in case—

Sardelle jerked her hand up and frowned toward the shoreline. The clouds had thickened, so she wouldn't be able to see anything. Not with her eyes anyway. He looked that way anyway. Clouds scudded across the horizon, and the first stars had come out above. He shivered through his jacket. Their route had taken them farther from the equator, and the air felt much cooler than it had off the Iskandian shore, reminding him of the mountaintop mine where he had met Sardelle.

There are eight airships waiting out there, over the coast. She met his eyes. *They're strung in a line, each just within sight of the next, so they can cover a lot of territory.*

You're sure?

Positive.

Ridge jabbed at the communication crystal. "Everyone awake? Good. Cover your power crystals and hide any hint of light in your cockpits. We're getting close. We're going to change our original route to avoid being predictable and to fly in over the mountains."

"The very white mountains with the storm clouds over them, sir?" Duck asked.

"Yes." Ridge wondered if Duck had better eyes than he did or if he had been paying more attention. "Stay close and fly safe."

"Yes, sir."

Apex and Ahn echoed the words. They both sounded as tired as he felt, and he was picking a tougher route, but if there were unfriendly eyes watching, it made sense to take a few risks to avoid detection. The question was how had those unfriendly eyes known Wolf Squadron was coming? An assumption based on the fact that some spies had escaped? Or had someone warned them that Ridge and his team were coming through tonight? He couldn't imagine that the king had told many people about this mission, but that old castle doubtlessly had a lot of servants wandering about in it, not to mention old crevices and nooks that might support eavesdropping ears.

Ridge was tempted to fly closer to land, to make sure he turned west at the right moment to take them into the shrouded mountains, but he didn't want to be spotted—or heard—by an airship by veering

inland too early, either. He couldn't see much through the clouds.

A little farther. There's one directly to our west, then one at the southern foothills of the mountains about four miles past it. That's the last one.

Thank you. Ridge looked at the clock on the control panel, checked the air speed indicator on his wing, and used the time to count off the miles. He waited until the sixth mile, then dipped the flier's nose and wiggled his tail to signal a turn. He could have used the communication crystal, but the old signals were ingrained in him.

You're clear. The Cofah shouldn't be able to see you.

He trusted Sardelle, but his shoulders were tense nonetheless as they flew west, the rough air within the clouds battering at his wings. He could correct the flier easily enough and hurried to do so. He still felt the need to impress Sardelle, and this was his milieu—and her first time in it. He wanted to give her as smooth a ride as possible.

The clouds parted for a moment, opening up the view to the south and west. Ridge spotted the steppes and the mountains looming ahead before the fliers were swallowed by the haze again. He thought he glimpsed that northernmost airship, too, but it had also cut out its lights, so he couldn't be sure.

"That's uncanny, sir," Duck breathed. "How did you know?"

"Know what?" Apex asked.

"About the airship," Ahn said.

Great, two out of three of his pilots had better eyes than he did. He was getting old.

"Just a hunch," Ridge said. He hated to take credit for Sardelle's clairvoyance, but he wasn't going to announce her sorceress skills to his people in this manner, either. Or in any other manner. It wasn't his secret to announce.

You can take credit. I don't mind. I think it's nice the way they look up to you. Obviously, you've achieved that without my help, but I'm happy to contribute to the extraordinariness of the legend.

Ridge snorted. *I'm about as extraordinary as a sock. I thank you for your help, though. You've already kept us out of trouble, and we haven't even crossed over Cofah soil yet.* He had no idea how the telepathy worked, but he tried to impart a sense of appreciation along with his thoughts. There weren't words to articulate how relieved and glad he was to have her back there instead of Colonel Thugly. It was hard to articulate, too, how much it meant to him when someone helped keep his people from getting hurt.

Sardelle gripped his shoulder, then touched his cheek again before settling back to let him fly. She understood. Good.

They soon flew over the shoreline, passing into snow-dusted foothills, then snow-buried peaks. The storm clouds Duck had noted

grew darker and denser, and flecks of snow stuck to Ridge's goggles. He wiped at them with his scarf. *Can you sense any other trouble ahead?*

Not at this time. There's nothing else in the air in our immediate vicinity. There are some villages near the streams down there, so I wouldn't fly too low. Your propellers are noisy.

Yeah. That is one thing airships can do that we can't: coast.

"Heading out to the steppes," Ridge said when the coastline had disappeared behind them. "We're going to fly north of Brandenstone, then west another fifty miles to our coordinates. We'll find a landing spot and then send our worker bees off on their mission."

"While we nap like turtles in a sunbeam, sir?" Duck asked, his words garbled by a yawn.

"While we take turns camouflaging our fliers, then maintaining a vigilant and professional watch over them and our surroundings, alertly awaiting the return of our allies."

"I can nap while doing those things."

"I did see him sleeping on the gun range once," Apex said. It was one of the first things he had said all day that wasn't a response to a direct question. Ridge planned to split him and Tolemek up as soon as the squadron arrived. "The cacophonous explosions going off all around him did not disturb his slumber."

"I wasn't sleeping. I was practicing feigning death, the way hog-nosed snakes do, so if I'm overrun in a big battle someday, the enemy will ignore me and go on to someone else. Someone with a big mouth full of big words maybe."

"If you're referring to thanatosis, the process by which some animals deter predators, then I believe it's done without snoring."

Ridge smiled, glad to have Apex speaking again. He hoped Apex would speak to *him* at some point, too, and that he wouldn't be lumped into the enemy camp for having brought Tolemek along.

"Village lights below," Ahn said. "And something bigger and brighter on that tower."

Ridge saw it. There was a conical beam coming out of the top of the four- or five-story stone tower. They were too far inland for a lighthouse. Could the Cofah have some kind of searchlights for watching for intruders by night? He had flown all over the sea between Iskandia and Cofahre, but the king rarely ordered missions that actually breached enemy borders.

"Anyone know what that is?" Ridge asked.

It wasn't here the last time I was in Cofahre, but that doesn't mean much, Sardelle thought dryly. *It looks like a mill converted into a watchtower. There's a single person in a room at the top.*

"Nowon says the Cofah have watchtowers in all of their villages within fifty miles of the ocean," Apex said. "Their status as an

aggressive and conquering nation has earned them enemies from all over the world, but they're particularly concerned about Iskandian fliers, so these lights can be trained toward the skies." After a pause, he added, "He's also heard that some of the towers are equipped with defenses."

"Like what?" Ridge asked. They were thousands of feet off the ground, so he couldn't imagine anything ground-based bothering them.

"Nowon could only speculate. He's always come to Cofahre by sea and traveled into this area by land. As far as he knows, we're the first team performing an aerial incursion."

"So we get to be the experimental mice in… some scientist's lab, eh?" He had almost said Tolemek's lab, and didn't know if he had caught himself too late. Any mention of labs might remind Apex of his unwelcome ally.

"Apparently, sir." Yes, Apex's tone had chilled several degrees there.

Getting them to work together and get to know each other might be preferable to keeping them separated, Sardelle suggested. *Despite his reputation and past mistakes—and, no, I do not mean to make light of what he was responsible for—he's not a heartless, megalomaniacal tyrant when you talk to him. He's actually pleasant and personable. That surprised me. Perhaps Apex will be able to, if not forgive him, forget about his past most of the time and learn to regard him as a coworker.*

Pleasant and personable? That wasn't quite how Ridge would have described the pirate.

Your Lieutenant Ahn finds him so.

Are you sure she didn't use the words handsome and loyal to her to explain his appeal?

These are my observations, not hers. Though I'll be happy to let him know you find him attractive.

Ridge grunted.

You learned to tolerate him during our shared weekends together, Sardelle added more seriously.

Mostly by avoiding him… *I wouldn't recommend he start a snowball fight with Apex. He's not the playful spirit I am.*

You know Ahn started that fight, right?

I suspected. I know my pilots well.

"That light is definitely probing the sky," Ahn said. "It's powerful for a gas lamp. What? Oh."

Ridge was on the verge of asking her what she meant, then realized Tolemek must be saying something. The conical beam coming from the tower had lifted toward the sky and was sweeping across the clouds. Ridge didn't like the way it was turning in their direction.

“Tolemek says the towers use oil burners, the same as their lighthouses, and an optical lens system to focus the intensity of the light. They’re on moveable somethings that can be tilted and turned.” Tolemek said something Ridge couldn’t hear—a correction probably, because Ahn added, “Close enough.”

“Well, that light is moving in our direction,” Duck said.

“Veer away,” Ridge said. “We’ll fly over the mountains until we’re past the city.” *I don’t suppose you have any way of quieting our propellers, Sardelle?*

I could, but your own people would notice. Do you want me to do it anyway?

He grimaced, not wanting to reveal her powers. If it had just been his squadron, maybe, but he didn’t know Nowon and Kaika that well. Therrik had certainly been full of threats when he had found out about Sardelle. Whenever and however that had happened.

No, never mind.

Ridge led the way toward the mountains again, though he didn’t like the heavy clouds wreathing them, obscuring the crags and ridges. Snow was falling, even out on the steppes, and something more akin to a blizzard lay ahead of them. He trusted his pilots to handle their fliers in winds and poor visibility, but at the same time, they were a long way from home without any spare parts or mechanics if they needed to do repairs. Only a few weeks had passed since that pirate battle over the harbor, where Tiger Squadron had lost two fliers and one pilot. Sardelle might be able to heal human beings, but cobbling a flier together and making it airworthy for a thousand-mile flight? He couldn’t count on that.

Something’s coming.

Ridge wiped his goggles and scanned the trees, rocks, and snow on the mountain slopes ahead. *What? Where?*

From behind and below. Two somethings. I don’t know what they are. They’re mechanical.

He loosened his harness and peered over the sides of his flier. Snow fell diagonally, thick flakes that hid the terrain. He could still make out the light being cast into the sky by that watchtower and thought he glimpsed something flying through it, perhaps halfway between that village and their current location. But as soon as it flew out of the beam of light, he lost it. The distance and snow made it hard to tell how large it had been. But smaller than an airship, he was certain of it. Another aircraft like a flier? The Cofah were reputed to be working on such technology, but nothing of that ilk had been spotted in Iskandian space yet.

“You see something, sir?” Duck asked.

“Maybe. I’m going to swing back and take a look. Everyone else,

stay on course. If we get separated, meet at the first set of coordinates."

"You want help, sir?" Ahn asked, and he imagined her patting the sniper rifle mounted in the cockpit next to her.

"Let me see what we're dealing with first. You three have passengers that need to make it to the landing spot. If there's trouble, and I can delay it… that's acceptable."

The mumbles and murmurs he got in reply didn't seem to agree. Oh, well.

Ridge pushed forward on the stick, dipping below the rest of the fliers and turning back toward the watchtower.

Definitely not airships, Sardelle thought. *But nothing natural. Almost like small versions of your fliers, but without pilots.*

How is that possible? Ridge's mind raced even as his eyes darted back and forth, searching the snowy night sky. *Some kind of magic?* Even with the Iskandian power sources, his people couldn't put fliers in the sky without pilots.

I don't sense anything like your energy sources, but there is… something.

That something buzzed out of the sky, not from below but from above, angling straight toward the cockpit. A black flying contraption with three sets of parallel wings stacked atop each other and a cylindrical body dove for him. Though startled, Ridge kept his calm, veering away smoothly. That calm, however, was threatened when the sound of machine gun fire rattled the heavens.

It wasn't coming from the first contraption but from the second, which also came in from above, diving straight toward him on his new course. There hadn't been a person, or even a cockpit—he couldn't have missed that. Who in all the hells was firing at him?

"Hang on," he yelled for Sardelle's sake, then swooped upward, much as he had in Crazy Canyon. He looped, turning upside down so he could come back down, this time with the pair of contraptions in his sights.

Sardelle popped into his thoughts, "speaking" rapidly, probably not wanting to break his concentration. *I could keep their bullets from hitting us, but you wouldn't be able to fire through the shield I erected.*

No shield. Ridge didn't say more, because he had the first contraption in view now. It hadn't changed course. His path brought him toward it from the side, and he thumbed the firing trigger. His own bullets streaked out, every fifth one an incendiary. One of those struck, and a burst of orange lit the sky for a moment. Ridge weaved and dipped, in case the second contraption was targeting him. But he caught sight of it over his left shoulder. It was on the same course as the first. They were flying in tandem, Ridge realized, now that he

could see the puzzle from outside of it rather than from within. Interesting. If they stayed together, that would make them easy to take out, but he didn't assume that they would. He didn't know *what* these things were or what to expect.

The first was damaged, but still flying, coming around toward him, the same as its buddy. This time, Ridge dove instead of pulling upward to make a loop. He twisted as he dove, then leveled out, wanting a better look at them as he passed under them.

Their guns fired again, but he thought he was safe, since their front ends were facing where he had been rather than where he was or where he was going. But in the poor lighting, he realized almost too late that they could fire in more directions than straight. More because of instinct than anything he saw, he pulled up again. Just in time. Bullets pounded the air where he had been.

A light flared behind him, but he ignored it, concentrating on these strange new foes. He did another loop, adjusting his fall so he came down behind them this time. He showed no mercy on the trigger, hammering the back end of the closest one. They had propellers in the front, like his flier, but he couldn't know for sure where the engine was. In the rear? Or buried under some armor farther toward the front? If there had been a pilot, he could have aimed at the person…

Hoping for luck, he continued to pound ammunition into the craft. It banked and swerved, trying to avoid him, but he hung on like a tick on a dog's tail. Finally, one of his bullets struck something vital. Black smoke poured from the back of the contraption, and it lost all of its momentum. It dipped, spiraling toward the mountainside below. Without taking time to admire his handiwork, Ridge accelerated after the second one. They were as fast as his craft, and more maneuverable thanks to their smaller size—and lack of passengers—but whoever or *whatever* was controlling them was used to horizontal movement and didn't think about the three dimensions offered by the sky. The remaining contraption tried to turn for home, but Ridge cut it off, slamming rounds into it again. This time, it exploded spectacularly, lighting up the night sky so much that he had to raise his arm to shield his eyes.

That wasn't my incendiary bullet, he thought dryly.

Jaxi wanted to help. She got excited, thinking we might deflect some bullets, or burn them out of the air, but you were too adept at swooping around and avoiding getting hit.

Ah, so that explained the glow. Sardelle had her sword out, the way she had the night she had battled that shaman and his Cofah bodyguards, the magical blade melting bullets out of the sky before they could reach her. *Sorry, I'll try to be less efficient next time.*

No need for that. But in future battles, please let me know if there's

anything I can do to help.

Ridge smiled, pleased by her calm demeanor. Her first flight, and she hadn't thought anything of the upside down loops or being shot at. Colonel Thugly probably would have been digging his nails into his shoulder. For a brief moment, Ridge entertained himself with the idea of recruiting Sardelle for his squadron, but a lot of rules and beliefs would have to change before that could be a possibility. In the meantime, they had other worries.

You can help me by figuring out exactly what those things were.

Hard from here. Can we go down and take a look at one?

"Sir? Everything all right?" Ahn asked.

Ridge didn't know how far the communication crystals worked, and he glanced up at first, expecting to see her flier nearby. But he and Sardelle were alone in the snowy sky.

"Two unmanned mechanical aircraft tried to shoot us out of the night," Ridge said.

"*Unmanned?*"

"The Cofah don't have that kind of technology," Apex said. "We don't, either, and we've been flying longer than they have."

"We downed them and are going to take a look," Ridge said. "Unless Nowon already knows all about them and wants to share that information."

"I have no knowledge of them," Nowon called, doubtlessly leaning up to Apex's shoulder to be heard. "They must be extremely new. I would appreciate it if you would retrieve a sample for me."

There was something off about a captain asking a colonel to go sample collecting for him, but Ridge merely said, "I'll see what we can do. Just finding the crash sites in the snow will be a challenge."

"Understood."

I can direct you to one.

Oh? Ridge thought of the avalanche she had dug a number of soldiers out of, including himself. *Because you saw where they went down and have a mathematical formula?*

Not exactly.

Ridge headed in the direction the first one had crashed, figuring there would be more remaining of that one, since it hadn't been obliterated in a fiery ball.

Jaxi is now feeling sheepish, Sardelle announced.

Oh? From our brief conversations and from what you've told me, I didn't think that was an emotion she could feel.

It's an extremely infrequent visitor for her. That's why I thought it might be worth sharing.

Ridge slowed down as they drew closer to the ground. The snow brightened the landscape somewhat, but he still couldn't see much.

The last thing he wanted was to successfully fight off the enemy attack only to bury himself in a snow bank because he wasn't paying attention.

About two hundred feet lower on the mountainside and ten degrees to port. As Ridge nudged the flier in the indicated direction, Sardelle added, *Do pilots use nautical directions?*

The hands on the clock usually. He leaned forward in his seat, his harness digging at his shoulders. Was that something black lying in the snow down there? Something besides a log?

A soft orange glow appeared in the direction he was looking. If he hadn't seen the same effect on the highway north of Pinoth, it would have alarmed him, but he merely said, "Thank you." It lit up the ground, but it shouldn't be visible from far away. Which was good, because they weren't *that* far from the village. For all he knew, a squad of soldiers was on its way out to investigate the crashed contraptions.

No soldiers yet, but I'll let you know if that changes.

How far out can you sense? With the light, Ridge could tell the dark blob on the snow was the wreck rather than a log, and he took them close, circling and trying to find a landing spot on the sloped and treed hillside.

A few miles usually. But Jaxi is closer to fifty, and she can communicate with me from an even greater distance.

Really? Is she more powerful than you? Up until the morning's conversation, Ridge had been thinking of the sword as a tool, rather than an entity, and he had certainly never considered that its powers might be so great.

That question resulted in her losing all of her sheepishness and growing very smug.

Oh, sorry.

Ridge found a flat area about a half mile from the wreck, the snow largely swept free of the rock by prevailing winds. He wished he could get closer, but mountains weren't known for offering many landing spots. Sardelle's light was still guiding him, so he took them down. Even though the two-seater had been unwieldy during the skirmish, he was glad for the thrusters at the moment. He never could have landed his regular flier anywhere except a road or maybe a field out on the steppes.

Jaxi was born more than three hundred years before I was. She's that many generations closer to those original humans who were daring enough to mate with dragons and whose offspring received some of their powers. As the dragon blood was diluted over the centuries, sorcerers grew less and less powerful. A weak one from Jaxi's generation would have been considered a moderately or even very powerful magic user in my

generation. I believe the shaman I faced outside of Galmok Mountain was an example of a very powerful magic user in this generation. I defeated him, but I wasn't considered powerful by my generation's standards. As for Jaxi, she can't do all that she could do as a mortal, but she's still quite capable.

Ridge settled on the stone outcropping, the thrusters and heat of the engine melting the snow in the crevices of the rock. He unfastened his harness, climbed down, and turned, intending to give Sardelle a hand, but she hopped down and landed beside him.

"Let's go see what you brought down," she said with a smile.

"Yes, ma'am." It was almost strange speaking out loud after all of their silent conversations, but with the propeller stopped and the wind a mere breeze, softened by the snowfall, there was no need. Ridge gazed out toward the steppes for a moment, making sure there wasn't any obvious sign of pursuit, then headed up the slope.

"I think that village is exactly what it looked like," Sardelle said. "Something simple and rural that just happened to have someone stationed in a watchtower. There are probably only one or two soldiers for the post."

"One or two soldiers can rouse a village of people with bows and pitchforks." Ridge grimaced as his boots sank into the snow up to his knees. This was going to be quite the slog, maybe taking longer than he had realized. So much for the night's sleep—or standing watch professionally—that he had been waiting for.

Sardelle didn't debate his statement. They clambered up the slope in silence, though they were soon breathing hard from their exertions. Ridge wasn't out of shape, but this was hard work. He kept looking up the hillside, hoping to spot the thing, but it had to be close to a half hour before the black wreckage came into sight. The three sets of wings had been torn off in the crash, and littered the mountainside. The rest of the battered body was half sunken into the snow.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he pushed his way toward it. "Nowon better appreciate his sample. Even if all I feel like lugging back is a screw."

Sardelle increased the intensity of the light that had been guiding their way, but stood back to leave the investigating to him. "My engineering knowledge is rudimentary."

"And here I thought it was a secret passion when you were summarizing *Denhoft's Theories on Aerodynamic and Aerostatic Flight* to me."

Her light was just bright enough that he could make out the redness of her cheeks. That wasn't all from exertion, he didn't think.

Ridge stepped toward the wreck, wanting to touch the remains of the hull to see if the black was paint or some strange metal he wasn't

familiar with, but paused, his hand hovering above the fuselage. “It doesn’t have any magical alarms or traps that will go off if I touch it, does it?”

“None that I can sense.”

“You didn’t think it was magic before. Are you still of that opinion?”

“I’m… not sure. I do sense something not entirely mundane, but it’s not like the tools and baubles that sorcerers can make.” She groped in the air with her gloved hands, as if she could find the proper term to explain her feeling there.

Ridge prodded the hull with a finger. Nothing happened. Emboldened, he patted around the cylindrical hull, searching for an access panel. There wasn’t a cockpit, nor would the contraption have been able to support the weight of a man. It was only a third of the size of a one-man flier. Even the guns were scaled down, though he didn’t doubt that they could have damaged his craft if their bullets had struck. The hull did seem to be painted, so his thoughts of strange new metals were unfounded.

“Got something,” he said, his gloves sliding over a crack in the side. He pulled out his utility knife and levered the panel open. He expected some burst of light to shine out, something similar to what his flier’s power crystal emitted, but there was nothing of the sort. There were wheels and levers inside with wires all going to a little box. It had been dented in the crash, but he managed to pull it out, not worrying about the wires snapping. He pried it open, then leaned closer to Sardelle’s light.

A thumbnail-sized glass dome was mounted on something that reminded him of the punch cards used in machines back home. He couldn’t believe the technology he was familiar with could have directed these two aircraft. Not a chance.

He tilted the little dome toward the light and was surprised when a bubble of air moved around inside. “Huh.”

“A liquid?” Sardelle asked.

“A *crimson* liquid.” Ridge held it toward her. “Is that the source of your not-entirely-mundane feeling?”

Sardelle nodded without taking the board. Her eyes had grown wide.

“Dragon blood?” Ridge asked.

“I… think we should test it before making that assumption. Your king’s report, he didn’t mention anything like *this*, did he?” She spread her fingers toward the wreck.

“No.” Ridge pocketed the small board. Nowon was going to get a very interesting sample. “Let’s hope Tolemek has something in his bag for examining it. I can tell you one thing, right now.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve looked this craft over from nose to tail, and there’s nothing else on here that could be a fuel source, not that my brain can fathom anyway.”

“I’m not aware that dragon blood was ever used for fuel. The mind boggles at the notion of a dragon *allowing* its blood to be used thusly. Or used at all, for that matter. All the legends tell us they were the most formidable creatures in the world. And arrogant and prickly by nature. That said… I don’t know of anyone who was trying to power machines a thousand years ago. Your archaeologist pilot may have more insight, but you were pretty sophisticated if you were using whale oil lamps instead of candles back then.”

If the king’s spies had learned of this, Ridge understood the reasoning—the urgency—behind this mission.

His body had chilled, so he waved for them to head back to the flier. The weather wouldn’t be pleasant tonight wherever the squadron landed, but he hoped it would be a few degrees warmer on the flats beneath the mountains. He gave the wreck several long looks over his shoulder as he and Sardelle picked their way back along the trail they had broken.

“Something else bothering you?” she asked.

“Just thinking that whatever we’re dealing with, it’s far more advanced than anything the Cofah have brought to Iskandia before. If there are more machines like this, we could be in trouble.”

Chapter 7

Sardelle rubbed her arms, shivering in the cold air and watching Ridge try to stifle yawn after yawn. She wanted to drag him off to bed, or to a bedroll, as the case was. Instead, as the midnight snow fell, he was crouching over a map with Nowon and Kaika, pointing and discussing an extraction plan with them, while the other pilots checked the fliers for damage or maintenance needs. A couple of bullets had clipped the wings of Ridge's craft during the skirmish with the Cofah constructs.

Since landing, Sardelle had gotten her first good look at the elite troops captains, but they hadn't done more than give her curious and slightly suspicious looks. The pilots, too, were giving her the squint eye. Duck had been sent off on some mission as soon as they arrived, but Apex kept frowning in Sardelle's direction. Everyone had to be wondering what Ridge had been thinking in bringing her, especially considering the unorthodox manner in which she had been added to the team. She had been thinking of how she might prove herself to the king, but perhaps she needed to start with them.

Without revealing *yourself?*

I don't know, Jaxi.

While Ridge and the others worked, Sardelle loitered near Tolemek, wanting to hear his assessment of the liquid trapped in the bubble. Strange that he was the person here she was most comfortable with now, aside from Ridge. A few weeks ago, she never would have thought she would have any sort of relationship with him, but as the only other non-military person here, she felt a kinship with him. Maybe it was because he was getting even darker glares than she from Apex and from the captains too. Ahn was the only one who saw him as anything other than Deathmaker.

At the moment, Tolemek was kneeling on a bare patch of ground, a lantern burning beside him as he poked into one of his bags. He was assembling something.

"A microscope?" Sardelle guessed as the pieces came together.

"Yes, a very small and weak one. My equipment selection was severely limited due to the weight restrictions someone imposed upon

me." He leveled a stare, not at Ridge but at Ahn.

"It's not my fault your muscles weigh so much," Ahn said. "You should be happy we didn't overheat the engine and fall out of the sky over Hariti."

"Yes… my massive brawn is an ever-present burden. It's amazing I can fit through doorways without having to turn sideways."

"He's just cranky because he doesn't have all of his beakers, test tubes, crucibles, and snakes with him," Ahn told Sardelle.

"Snakes?"

"And spiders. Haven't you seen his terrariums?"

"I haven't been up to the lab, no."

"The lab assistant has assured me the creatures will be tended," Tolemek said, pulling a slide out of a case. "It's largely the Micon Burner I'm missing right now. It's useful for sterilization, combustion, and heating my hands when they're cold." He grimaced and flexed his fingers—he had removed his gloves to set up. "Zirkander, can I break this bubble?" He held up the board from the wreck.

"Did Nowon get to look at the intact sample?" Ridge asked.

The captain trotted over before Tolemek could answer and knelt beside the microscope. Tolemek handed him the board with its captured liquid and fiddled with the microscope settings while Nowon studied the machine innards by the light.

"Interesting. If this is what they're doing with the dragon blood, it's not at all what my brother thought. He mentioned weapons, yes, but the last I heard, he believed the Cofah were going to inject it into humans to enhance people, possibly giving them the power of the sorcerers of old."

"Maybe they tried and that didn't work." Tolemek took back the board. He jabbed a needle into the back of it, drawing out some of the liquid inside the bubble without breaking the glass.

"Perhaps," Sardelle said, "they still bear the prejudices toward sorcerers that their ancestors did. In my studies, I've learned that the Cofah had a… purging similar to the one on Iskandia." She swallowed down emotion that welled up into her throat, reminding herself that this was distant history to these people and that they wouldn't understand how recent it all had been for her. Except Ridge. She caught him gazing across the camp at her, his eyes gentle with understanding. "Supposing it's actually possible to give a human being powers by injecting dragon blood into their veins—and I don't know if that's feasible or if such blood would be rejected or destroyed by the immune system—the Cofah may fear that in creating sorcerers, they would be bringing about their own destruction… or creating their own masters."

Nowon was watching her intently. "What is your specialty?" he

asked. The and-why-are-you-here hung unspoken in the air.

"I am a student of healing and history," Sardelle said, then glanced at Lieutenant Apex. He'd only known her as an archaeologist, as per Ridge's cover story. Would he be suspicious if she now claimed a doctor's talents?

But he was frowning at the microscope. "Aren't we prematurely believing we have dragon blood? I fail to see how it could be acquired unless the Cofah have found dragons, and that's highly unlikely."

Sardelle imagined some sealed amphora that could have been unearthed by archaeologists. Or miners. But even if someone a dozen centuries ago had found a dead dragon and exsanguinated it for some reason, the blood couldn't still be *alive* today.

"I'm taking a look now," Tolemek said, "though I confess I don't know if dragon blood looks different from human blood at the microscopic level or not. I've never seen any before nor seen it described in textbooks. Dragons predate modern science. They predate most primitive science too."

Sardelle found herself leaning over his shoulder as he peered into the microscope. Nowon did too. Even Ridge came over, apparently more intrigued by the results than by his map.

"The cells are still alive," Tolemek said. "Interesting. There's no nuclei in them, so it's not human blood. Nor is it mammal blood. The cells are large, but that doesn't necessarily mean much. Frogs have larger cells than humans."

"There's nothing that reeks of magic, eh?" Ahn asked.

"There are anomalies. You'll have to let me know what qualifies as reeking of magic."

"Weird concoctions that have a creepy blue glow even after all the lights are turned off at night."

Tolemek frowned over at her. "I assure you there's nothing magical about Illumination Goo Number Four. Bioluminescent plankton are the source of that glow. I captured the dinoflagellates from your own harbor."

Nowon and Ridge shifted uneasily, and Apex openly scowled over at Tolemek. It might have been the talk of magic or the reminder of Tolemek's scientific nature—and what he had done with it in the past.

Ahn noticed the reactions and looked like she wished she hadn't spoken in the first place.

"Like a jar full of fireflies," Sardelle suggested, though she suspected Tolemek might have applied some magic without even realizing it—she had seen the evidence of that in a number of his concoctions—if only to keep the plankton alive indefinitely. Like her, he would have to tread carefully in the modern world.

"Oh," Ridge said. "That would make a useful light, I guess."

Tolemek fished in his bag. “I’ll test the blood for an electrical current or some kind of charge that might suggest… *enhanced* properties.”

“We saw it power an aircraft and shoot at us,” Ridge said. “You don’t think that’s proof of enhanced properties?”

“It’s possible someone was using magic to control the craft from afar.” Tolemek withdrew a device similar in look and size to a thick compass, but with bolts for attaching wires.

Ridge met Sardelle’s eyes. She shook her head once. She would have felt something like that.

Tolemek attached probes on wires to the testing contraption.

Galvanometer, Jaxi supplied.

How do you *know that? Are you poking around in his thoughts?*

Of course not. I’m simply a student of the sciences.

And tools that hadn’t been invented yet when last we walked the world?

We’ve been free for weeks now. It’s not my fault you haven’t applied yourself to catching up and acquiring a modern education.

Why don’t I believe you, Jaxi?

I have no idea, but that is *dragon blood as sure as I’m a powerful sorceress residing in a sword. You people could just ask me if there’s any uncertainty with these things. Also, you might want to keep him from poking around in there.*

What? Why?

Before Jaxi could answer, one of Tolemek’s needles brushed the damp blood on his slide. A sizzle sounded, charging the air, and he was hurled away from the microscope. He flew several feet, knocking Ridge over, before landing on his back. His already unruly hair stuck out in more directions than usual, as if he had been struck by lightning. His eyes were frozen open, stunned.

Stunned… or dead.

Afraid his heart had stopped, Sardelle rushed to his side, laying a hand on his chest. It hadn’t stopped, but the beats were jumpy and erratic. Healing electrocution victims was not something she had much experience with, but she did her best to sooth the muscle and return it to its usual beat pattern. Fortunately, Tolemek’s body seemed able to recover with minimal intervention. He gasped in a breath and blinked a few times.

“Are you all right, sir?” Apex asked.

He and Captain Kaika had come to either side of Ridge, each offering a hand to help him up. Ahn rushed to Tolemek’s side, frowning with concern and clasping his hand at the same time.

“Yes, fine. Thanks.” Ridge waved his soldiers back and sat up, propping an elbow on one knee. He waited until Tolemek lifted his head and was clearly alive, then asked, “Should I feel jealous that you

rushed over to check on him before me?"

Sardelle couldn't imagine he'd had many occasions in his life to be jealous, at least not of women choosing other men over him. "From what you've told me and from what I've garnered from your superior officers, if I fell to the ground beside you every time someone knocked you on your lower cheeks, all the skin on my knees would be scraped off."

"Probably true," Ridge said.

"Lower cheeks?" Captain Kaika's lip wrinkled up in disbelief. "Who says that?"

"She's very proper," Nowon observed.

"It's called being civilized," Ridge said, rolling to his feet, "And well-mannered. Unlike most soldiers I know."

Sardelle raised an eyebrow. She was accustomed to soldiers and knew that they would often choose different words to describe the anatomy, but it was a novelty to have them teasing her. She tried to decide if that signaled a modicum of acceptance or if it simply meant she was an aberration for more reasons than one.

"My manners are perfectly adequate," Nowon said.

"Mine aren't," Kaika said.

"That is a truth."

"Are you all right?" Ahn murmured to Tolemek. She didn't seem the type to fling herself onto a man to demonstrate love and relief, at least when others were around, but she had a firm grip on his hand.

"I think so." He rubbed his head. A charred scent lingered in the air around him.

"So, what did that teach us?" Ridge brushed snow off his hands and his… lower cheeks. "Besides that it's a bad idea to stick a little metal prong into a strange blood specimen."

"That whatever this is, it has tremendous energy potential," Tolemek said.

Huh. He wasn't willing to call it dragon blood yet. A hallmark of a scientist, Sardelle supposed. It always took them a few metric tons of proof before they were willing to upgrade something from a hypothesis to a theory, and even then, they used chalk rather than ink.

Because they don't have smart swords that could simply tell them the truth.

And how can you *be so positive that it's dragon blood and not some strange new liquid that was made with technology or sorcery?*

I can sense it, the same way I can sense whether a person has a hint of dragon blood in them. And you could sense it, too, if you opened your mind and paid attention.

Sardelle had sensed *something*, but, like Tolemek, she wasn't quick to glom onto the possibility that the Cofah had somehow acquired a

substance that hadn't existed in the world for a thousand years.

That we know of. I have one more tidbit of information for you, one you're welcome to share with your new friends. That dragon blood isn't cut with human blood.

So it's not from the offspring of a human and dragon union?

It's not.

The thud of hooves sounded in the darkness beyond their encampment.

"Duck," Ridge said, even before Sardelle stretched out her senses in that direction. He jogged to the edge of the camp and waved into the darkness.

The dark forms of five horses came into view, picking their way around the dead clumps of grass thrusting up through the snowy steppes. All of the creatures had saddles, but only one had a rider.

Lieutenant Duck slid off and saluted his commander. He had reins, but the rest of the horses had simply followed him. "Got your order here, sir."

"Are these stolen horses?" Sardelle couldn't imagine the lieutenant, goofy big ears and big grin, sauntering into a market to *buy* the horses—he looked no more Cofah than she did—nor was this the hour for horse markets.

"These are *borrowed* horses, ma'am," Duck said earnestly. "I went a-visiting to a farm over yonder with a couple of apples in my pocket, made friends with this big fellow here—" he patted the dark stallion's neck, "—and I guess that made him inclined to follow me when I opened the gate in his paddock. Some of his friends followed too. They must have heard about the apples."

"And they saddled themselves up for you as well," Sardelle said. "Impressive."

"Horses like to dress up and look good when they go out, ma'am."

"You needn't be so suspicious of your gift, Sardelle," Ridge said.

"Gift?"

"Those three are for you, Tolemek, and the person he aims to bring back."

"We're going tonight?" Tolemek asked.

"It's a ways to ride, and I expect you'll need to sneak aboard a train at some point," Ridge said, "but this is as close as we dare bring the fliers. The region gets a lot more populated closer to the river." He waved toward his map, still sprawled in the snow. "You'll need to find a way to ship your sister home, because we don't have any more seats in the fliers. If you want to go with her, that's fine, but I need Lieutenant Ahn back here to fly her craft home. We're not leaving any of these in the Cofah's back yard."

Tolemek massaged the back of his head. He had a dumbfounded

expression on his face, and Sardelle wondered if the jolt had affected more than his heart.

"Sir," Apex said, "you're going to let him *leave*? And trust him to come back home when he feels like it? He could report to some Cofah military outpost and tell them everything he knows."

"If he tried, he'd be thrown back in a dungeon," Ahn said.

"If we don't send him away, he'll be here in camp, experimenting with that blood," Ridge said. "He'll probably blow us all up."

Tolemek's dumbfounded look faded, but he still seemed as surprised as Apex that he was being allowed to go. As if Sardelle wouldn't keep an eye on him. She didn't believe he meant to flee back to his people—he cared for Ahn and was being allowed to pursue the work he was passionate about in Iskandia—but she could stop him from wandering off if she had to.

I can if you can't, Jaxi put in brightly.

"I will gather what I need," Tolemek said.

"Sir, I would like to go with them," Ahn said, her fingers twitching toward one of the horses, as if she wanted to run over and hop on at any second.

"I know you would, Lieutenant, but we're moving the fliers as soon as everybody leaves. There are too many paths leading back to us." He waved toward the horses, but he must be thinking of those crashed unmanned fliers too. "I need you here."

"But after that, we'll most likely just be waiting in camp until everyone gets back from their missions, right? I could help move the camp, then catch up with them."

"Given that the Cofah have some new technology—" Ridge waved toward the spot where Tolemek had been examining the blood, "—I'm not feeling that secure in the notion that we'll be able to stay in one spot undetected for days. We may have to move every night."

Ahn clenched her jaw, but she didn't continue to argue. She watched Tolemek pack, then ran over to her flier and pulled out her own bag. For a moment, Sardelle thought she meant to disobey, to throw the bag on one of the horses and ride off, but Ahn only pulled something out, then jumped down from the flier. She strode over to Tolemek, who pushed his hair behind his shoulders, and gazed down at her.

"Here." She held out a pistol in a holster. "It's a Maverick Eight-Eighty. Most accurate pistol in the world, as fine as all but the best sniper rifles and good for close quarters."

"You think I'll need to shoot my way into my sister's…" Tolemek glanced around, saw a couple of others listening, and finished with, "hospital?"

"You might find all sorts of trouble on the way there. Especially

with that hair. You don't exactly look like a Cofah soldier anymore."

"Maybe I should cut it off. You've made that suggestion a few times."

"I suggested cutting it, not cutting it off. If you come back to me bald, I'll pour that illumination goop on your head. Now here." She thrust out the pistol again, and this time he took it.

"Ridge? May I speak with you?" Sardelle tilted her head toward a dark, private spot behind the fliers.

He nodded, but had a few more orders to deliver before joining her. "Nowon and Kaika, there are horses for you too. You're sure you don't want to take any of my people with you?"

"You're not offering yourself, sir? You did remove *our* colonel from the mission, after all." Kaika didn't sound serious, but Sardelle watched Ridge, not liking the idea of him heading off into a secret and doubtlessly well-guarded Cofah installation, not when he was sending her off in another direction.

Nowon rolled his eyes.

"I don't have the special skills the others have," Ridge said. "I just fly and shoot things."

"We have no need of extra assistance," Nowon said, and Kaika didn't argue.

"It's your mission," Ridge said, though he gazed thoughtfully over at Sardelle.

Do you want me *to go with them? Tolemek can probably retrieve his sister by himself.*

His eyes widened slightly at her telepathic question, but he recovered quickly. *I wish I could send you with them, but it doesn't sound like they want help. They might not be comfortable with your kind of help, either. After all, it took me a while to grow cozy with the idea, and I'm delightfully open-minded.*

Sure, you are. You nearly fell over when I teased you about the possibility that you might be telepathic.

Falling over wasn't what was on my mind that night. He gave her a quick wink. *But back to this. I know Ahn trusts Tolemek, but I'm not ready to let him wander off alone. You're the one person he won't think to cross if for some reason he's tempted.*

You're thinking of Jaxi. She's already threatened to kill him a couple of times. He's quite polite with her.

He won't cross you, either. He looks at you with respect. And wariness.

While Sardelle was debating whether she agreed with this assessment, Ridge faced the captains again. "We'll be waiting at the coordinates I pointed out on the map for your return in three nights, unless that spot is compromised, in which case our contingency pick-up location will be the Miarga River Fork on the other side of the

mountains. If we have to move again… put up a flare from the river. We'll be watching and come get you."

"Understood, sir," Kaika and Nowon said at the same time, then ran off to grab their bags.

Nowon headed out of the camp, a dark quiet form without a parting word for anyone. Kaika, on the other hand, thumped Ahn and Duck on the arms as she passed, saying, "Don't get too much napping in while you're back here in the rear, kids."

"Kids? Napping?" Duck stood up painfully straight. "I've been rummaging all up and down the countryside, hunting like a coonhound to find you all horses. And I flew you all the way over here, while you were snoring in the back."

Kaika had been on the move as she had spoken, and she waved over her shoulder at his protest. She did pause in front of Apex, who was standing in the shadows, glowering out at the night and sneaking glances at Tolemek.

"You always this grumpy, L.T.? You've been wearing my granddad's face since I met you. He's got colitis. What's your excuse?"

Apex opened and closed his mouth a couple of times. Flustered? Sardelle hadn't seen the two talking much. Duck seemed a little moon-eyed toward Kaika, but Apex either hadn't noticed she was a woman with some curves under her uniform, or he didn't care.

"I am not grumpy," he said. "I'm… perturbed."

"Well, relax some, will you?" Kaika gave him a kiss on the cheek, then sauntered out to the horses.

Now it was Duck's turn to open and close his mouth a number of times, before stammering, "What just happened?"

"Captain Kaika is more into grumps than horses," Ridge said, then walked over to Sardelle. He turned his back on the two lieutenants, Duck looking like he wanted to strangle Apex and Apex looking confused. In a lower voice, Ridge asked, "Did you still want to talk to me, or, ah, did we already do it?" He pointed two fingers at his eyes, then at hers.

Sardelle took his hand—there were enough shadows that nobody should notice, not that he ever worried that much about displaying affection in front of his people. "If Tolemek chooses to find alternative transportation back with his sister, do you want me to stay with them or come back to you?"

Ridge looked out toward the horses, where Tolemek was finishing packing. The two captains were already riding away. "I wish there was a way to communicate with you from afar. The… mind thing, that's only for close range, right? I think I remember you saying that."

"For me, it is. Jaxi can communicate with me over a couple hundred miles, at least."

"Could she relay messages to me?"

Not unless he jabs some of that dragon blood into his veins and learns to improve his mental reception to slightly greater than that of a rock.

"Jaxi says it's doubtful."

Jaxi made an obnoxious noise in Sardelle's head, something between a snort and a bout of flatulence.

Bout of flatulence? That captain is right. You're overly socialized.

She didn't say that.

She was thinking it.

"I could leave Jaxi with you," Sardelle said, the idea not all that repellent at the moment.

What? You're tromping into enemy territory with a pirate. You may need me.

Ridge's face screwed up, as doubtful as Jaxi's thoughts.

I'm sure I can muster my meager skills enough to defend myself. On the other hand, if Ridge and his team are discovered, they have nothing except mundane weapons for defense. "That way we could communicate through Jaxi, and you could let me know what you think—and if any trouble finds you back here." Sardelle would find a way to hurry back here if that happened. "Those aircraft at the watchtower may be nothing more than a hint as to what they're doing with that blood."

"I guess it wouldn't matter to me," Ridge said. "I hate to deny you your companion."

Sardelle unbuckled her sword belt and handed it to him, almost laughing because she had found it amusing that Ahn had given Tolemek her favorite gun. How was this different?

I could cut her favorite gun in half with a thought, that's how. Now Jaxi sounded grumpy. Too bad Kaika wasn't here to kiss her.

Ugh, I'll hold out for the dragon.

Ridge accepted the belt gingerly. "Any special instructions?"

"Don't leave her under a bed."

"Should I wear the belt, or would she be offended by that? I can put her in the cockpit of my flier if that's best."

"Wear the belt if you go anywhere, please. As you've seen, Jaxi can protect herself—with hurled kitchen pots and pictures if nothing else."

Pardon you, but I was only responsible for two *pots. And no pictures. The burglars made the rest of that mess. You better take that book along and figure out who those people were before heading back to Iskandia.*

I'm not sure I'll be going back, or at least not staying long if I do. Sardelle smiled to Ridge, trying not to let the sad thought show on her face. "I would be upset if she were somehow lost."

He clasped her hands. "I know you would."

What do you mean you might not be going back?

I haven't decided yet, but it's what we talked about before. I'm afraid

I've complicated his life, and not in a good way.

"I'll keep her safe," Ridge said and lowered his head, kissing her gently, his affection wrapping around her like a favorite cloak on a cold night. It made her heart ache, and tears pricked at her eyes.

Afraid he would notice, Sardelle stepped back, breaking the kiss. "I better not delay him. Traveling at night will be easier." She took a step, but paused, reaching up to run her hand down the side of his face, as if she could memorize the contours with her fingers.

"Safe journey, Sardelle," he said, a hint of concern in his voice, not just for her journey, she sensed, but because he thought she was acting a little oddly.

"You too," she whispered. She would explain later. This wasn't the time.

Chapter 8

The first light of dawn seeped through the gaps between the slats on the freight train. It was the second morning since Sardelle and Tolemek had left Ridge and the others. She leaned against the wall, her eyes closed, her senses open. They had left the countryside and entered Mason Valley, a more populated area where the asylum waited.

Cattle filled the car, and in the hours they had been cooped up, Tolemek had been pinned a couple of times by furry haunches. That was his fault for trying to pace in the crowded area. Sardelle simply stood in one spot, and the animals avoided her, but he kept gnawing on his knuckles and walking back and forth. A testament to his distraction, he had apologized more than once to the big animals when he bumped one. Or maybe he was simply a more polite ex-pirate than she had realized. He hadn't been talking to *her* that much. She was inclined to give him his privacy, but if he had some plan in mind, she would need to know about it soon.

"Will they let us in if we smell like a farm?" she asked over the *clicketyclack* of the train wheels.

"What?" Tolemek lifted his head, his dark ropy tangles of hair shadowing his face.

In the wan lighting, Sardelle couldn't see his expression, but she sensed the nervousness emanating from him and snatches of thought floating on the surface of his mind. Would his sister still be there? He hadn't visited in three years. Would they be able to get in? Would she want to go with him if she was there? If his father had been visiting, he could have been telling her lies about him. Or the truth. Just as bad. Would she even remember him? She had been mad with moments of lucidity the last time he had seen her. What if she had grown worse since then?

"You've stepped in cow dung at least three times during your pacing," Sardelle said, thinking he might appreciate a distraction from his musings. "And we both smell fragrant."

He stared at her, apparently unamused by her attempt at distracting him. She shouldn't be that surprised. She had never been

the class jokester during her school days.

"I wasn't planning to walk up to the reception desk and ask for permission to see her," Tolemek said.

"No?"

"There's a kitchen in the back of the building. I thought we'd go through that door, sneak up to the second floor, find her room, and simply…"

"Kidnap her?" Sardelle suggested.

"It would only be kidnapping if she didn't want to come." He lifted his eyes toward the wooden ceiling of the car. "Which is a possibility, I fear."

"I thought you two were close at one point." Sardelle already understood his concerns, but he might feel better if he spoke about them.

"We were. After my brother died…" He sighed. "It doesn't matter right now. I just need to find her first and see how much of her… of *her* remains."

Of her sanity, that had been what he'd almost said.

"If it helps, I haven't heard of many cases where the ability to use magic drives someone crazy," Sardelle said. "It can account for moodiness, and I've heard of suicides, especially in those who weren't trained, but split personalities and other personality disorders are rare, or at least not any more common among the gifted than in the mundane."

"Was that supposed to be comforting?" he snapped.

She drew back, startled at his anger. Then she realized he had latched onto one of her words. Suicides.

"I'm sorry." Tolemek bowed his head in a further apology. "I don't have the right to question you or snarl at you."

Sardelle spread a hand. "Of course you do. I'm just a person."

He gave her a wry shake of his head. "No, you're not. Regardless, I appreciate you coming with me. And Zirkander arranging this. I honestly didn't expect any of that."

"I gave you my word I would help when you saved the city."

"I know, but you were desperate. And keeping your word to an enemy, that's not something most people would bother with, especially someone…" Tolemek extended a hand toward her.

"I'm not supposed to keep my word because I'm a sorceress?"

"It's not as if there would be repercussions that could affect you if you didn't."

"That's when integrity matters most, isn't it?" Sardelle frowned, disturbed that he thought so little of her, or maybe it was of sorcerers in general. Had she done something to give him a poor impression of her? She knew people sometimes mistook her quiet reserve for

aloofness or indifference, but she didn't feel that way.

"I'm not fit to judge a person's integrity," he said dryly.

Ah, maybe that was what lay behind his reasoning—his own mistakes in the past. He didn't believe he was worthy of someone's word?

"It *was* the magic affecting her," Tolemek said. "I'm certain of it. I tested her in every manner I knew how, and I couldn't find a mundane explanation for her change."

"The mind is a complicated organ. Science may have advanced a great deal in the last few hundred years, but I think it'll be a few hundred more before the brain is completely understood."

Tolemek shifted to avoid a restless cow with the ability to crush his foot with one misstep.

"When *did* she change?" Sardelle asked. "She was normal growing up?"

"A little quirky, but mostly normal, yes."

She wagered that his family would have described him as a quirky kid too.

"It was after our older brother died, and after I gave up on my dream and entered the military to appease my father. I came back on leave when I was… twenty-one, or so, I guess. We're twelve years apart, so she was nine then. She remembered me, but she also kept talking to herself when nobody was around. Sometimes she seemed to be talking to someone else. She displayed a few powers, being able to knock things over with her mind when she was angry, and my parents grew afraid. My mother was afraid *for* her, but my father was more afraid of what the neighbors would think."

"He sounds like a lovely man." Sardelle wondered if Tolemek and Ahn had shared stories of their fathers with each other. Maybe that had facilitated their unlikely relationship.

A steam whistle screeched. The car shuddered as the engine slowed down.

"We should get out before it comes to a full stop. We'll be less likely to be spotted that way." Tolemek eyed the sliding door on the side of the car. Five or six tightly packed cows stood between him and it. Odd that a scientist who had concocted countless clever potions and devices should seem daunted by animals. Granted, they *were* large and did tend to give a person flat, unfriendly stares.

Sardelle gave them gentle nudges with her mind, and they shifted aside to let her pass. Tolemek followed in her wake.

She slid the door open, revealing warehouses and factories in the bowl of the valley with houses dotting the hillsides. Night lingered, and lanterns burned all over the city, but people were already walking and riding in the streets. There weren't any lights in the cargo car, and

she doubted anyone would notice the open door. As soon as the train slowed to a speed where they could jump out without breaking any bones, Tolemek hopped into the gravel lining the tracks. Sardelle jumped after him and, with a flick of her mind, closed the door behind her, so the cattle would stay put. She had no sooner landed than a voice rang out above the chugging of the train.

"Stowaways!"

A deep-voiced dog bayed a cry that must have meant something similar.

"Run," Tolemek urged, sprinting through the gravel and toward a chain-link fence with barbed wire lining the top. These Cofah were serious about keeping their cattle from escaping.

Tolemek, being taller and more athletic than she, sprang to the top of the fence and leaped over, scarcely impeded by the barbed wire. As Sardelle reached the bottom and was about to climb after him, the first shots fired. A bullet skipped off the gravel, inches from her heels.

"The hells with climbing," she muttered and flung out a hand, slicing through the chain with her mind. She raised a barrier about herself in case another bullet came while she was pushing through.

But the next shot came from three feet away: Tolemek firing toward the guard charging down the gravel path toward them. He didn't hit the man—the bullet clanged off the side of the moving train rolling past a couple of feet away. The guard faltered, probably realizing he wasn't dealing with a couple of unarmed kids.

Sardelle had time to squeeze through the fence and sprint into an alley. Tolemek was waiting for her at the mouth, but he took off as soon as she joined him. She pushed herself to match his long legs and keep up with him.

"Was that because he spotted my pale skin, or do all stowaways get shot on sight here?" Sardelle asked.

"Dodging the fare is a crime. He was probably shooting to scare, but I couldn't be sure."

They ran three blocks before Tolemek turned onto a broad residential street lined with gas lamps. No, those were kerosene lamps, Sardelle realized. Maybe gas lighting wasn't as common here yet as it was in the cities of Iskandia.

A donkey-drawn wagon rolled past in front of them, and Tolemek slowed to a walk. He slipped his pistol into its holster and covered it with his coat.

"Lieutenant Ahn will be disappointed in you," Sardelle said, catching her breath.

"Because I shot at someone with her gun? I think that's why she gave it to me."

"Because you *missed*."

“Oh. That was intentional. I would prefer not to leave piles of bodies behind on this quest. My sister was always a gentle soul, despite the moments of craziness where she occasionally hurt people. She wouldn’t approve of me using violence to get her out.”

“Good.” Even if Sardelle had always considered the Cofah enemies, it was their military and government she had a problem with, not the average subject. “I do appreciate you watching out for me.” She kept her voice low, since there were people out in the street, and they would doubtlessly find it odd to hear an Iskandian accent in their town. She had pulled up the hood of her cloak, as well, and wore gloves to hide her pale hands.

Tolemek gave her a sidelong look. “I suspect you would have been fine without my help. I… sensed you doing something.” His voice had taken on an odd note.

She had given him a few lessons on developing his power at Ridge’s cabin in the woods, but Tolemek had yet to grow accustomed to using his talents or truly comfortable with the idea that he might *have* talents. Non-mundane ones, anyway.

“Cutting through the fence and erecting an invisible barrier around myself to protect against projectiles,” she said. “And pokey fence pieces.”

Tolemek snorted and raised his own hand. It was too dark to make out details, but there was a dark smudge on his palm? Blood? Maybe he hadn’t cleared that barbed wire as easily as it had seemed.

“The sanitarium is on the hill up there.” He pointed toward the end of the residential area and to a gray stone building perched on the ridge. Two dark towers rose like gargoyles, scowling down into the valley.

“That looks more like a prison than a hospital.”

“Now you know why I hated the idea of my sister being sent there.” Thoughts of his father arose in his head again, of a violent fight that had involved blows.

Sardelle turned her focus elsewhere, toward the people they passed. She needed to know if any of them found these two strangers odd. It wasn’t a small town, but Mason Valley lacked the anonymity of a metropolis. Most were worried about getting to work rather than watching for strangers.

They climbed a dirt road that ran up the slope in switchbacks. In the town, the snow had been cleared from the streets, but out here, the only bare spots were muddy ruts cut by wagons. Sardelle eyed the towers. She didn’t sense anyone in them, but asked the question that came to mind, nonetheless.

“Will anybody be on guard and watching our approach?”

“I doubt it. It used to be a castle, and there are spots for guards, but

I've never seen anyone up there. There *are* guards who walk the halls inside however. There's more danger of the patients trying to escape than anyone breaking in."

Instead of continuing to the front gate, Tolemek veered off the road and into the snow. He walked along the thick gray building toward the first corner. A few windows dotted the walls, but they were more like arrow slits than anything designed to allow in light and air. Sardelle couldn't imagine the rooms—cells?—inside were comfortable, and a quiet rage began to grow in her breast for this girl who had been imprisoned here because her father had been worried about what the neighbors might think of her unexplained outbursts.

Not as bad as being chained up with rocks and hurled into a lake to drown. Jaxi's voice sounded more faintly in her head than usual—the train had taken them over a hundred and fifty miles, on top of the ten they had ridden before arriving in a town with a station.

I'm not so sure about that. Sardelle eyed the drab building as Tolemek led her around another corner. *How is Ridge?*

Pining in your absence.

Sardelle snorted. *I meant how is the camp? No trouble since they moved the fliers?*

Your virile lover has woken his troops to perform physical exercises. When you return, his chest will be as hard and muscular as ever. You would be a fool not to come back to him.

So in summary, your answer is, no, there's no trouble at camp.

Correct. In my spare time, I have been reading your pilfered library book.

That book was borrowed. Sardelle followed Tolemek around yet another tower, and he pointed at what must be the kitchen door he had mentioned. She had better end this conversation so she could concentrate.

Yes, much like Lieutenant Duck's horses. Strange how the definitions of words have changed over the centuries. I believe I've selected three possible organizations that might be troubling you.

Oh?

The Alabaster Motherhood has been watching out for soldiers for several hundred years. Perhaps some wizened mother or grandmother is irritated by your influence on Ridge.

Sardelle thought of the officer next door and his nosy grandmother. It was hard to imagine that woman as more than an innocent gossip. *And the other two?*

Tolemek stopped in front of the door and slipped a vial out of his bag, unfastening an eye-dropper lid.

The Heartwood Sisterhood was founded over a millennium ago to protect innocent young men from the nefarious advances of female

dragons.

Oh, please. As if that was ever a big problem.

Tolemek dabbed something into the door lock. Smoke wafted out. Sardelle could have simply opened the lock, but Jaxi had her distracted. Always better to empower men than make them feel unneeded anyway, right?

Apparently a lot of men went on quests, hoping to find dragon lovers and leaving suitable young women back in their villages. A lot of those men found dragons who liked to toast humans like skewers of meat on the fire. This left a lot of eligible women who couldn't find men to marry. It also left a shortage of men to plant and harvest the crops. Those dragons, such rabble-rousers.

Jaxi, are you teasing me about this group?

Not at all. They're the seventh entry in the book. I'm just summarizing what's there.

You mean the part about toasting humans like skewers of meat isn't actually in the text?

That's part of my summary.

Tolemek turned the knob and eased the door open. He listened, then stepped inside, holding it for Sardelle. Clanks and thuds came from the front of the kitchen, but nothing except counters, oversized stew pots, and iceboxes was visible. He and Sardelle weaved past crates of potatoes, apples, and onions, as Tolemek headed away from the noise and voices up front. He found another door and escaped into the hallway without being noticed—until he turned and smacked into someone who had been about to enter the kitchen.

"Who—" the man got out before Tolemek rammed his palm into his nose.

The person flew backward, his shoulder slamming into the wall. Tolemek followed him, producing a rag from somewhere and pressing it to the man's nose. He flailed, trying to punch Tolemek, but the blows soon grew weak and ineffective. A few seconds later, the man's eyes rolled back into his head, and he slumped down like a rag doll. Tolemek caught him and removed a key ring Sardelle hadn't noticed from the man's waist—there were also a pistol and handcuffs there. Tolemek dragged the inert man down the hall, past three doors, then opened a fourth. A broom closet.

"I get the feeling you've broken into a lot of places in your life," Sardelle whispered.

"A few. I've also broken in *here* before."

Tolemek handcuffed the guard's wrist and looked around the closet for something secure to attach him to. Unfortunately, there weren't any pipes or rods or the like. He settled for chaining the poor fellow to the mop bucket. He waved to acknowledge the uselessness of the

choice and said, “He sucked in enough of my inhalant that he should be unconscious for the next half hour.”

Sardelle jammed the locking mechanism after they shut the door and walked away. It might buy them a little more time. Just in case collecting the sister wasn’t a matter of a simple in-and-out. “You haven’t told me your sister’s name,” she realized as they climbed stairs to the second level.

“Tylie.” He stopped on the landing to listen and look in both directions. The slender windows on either end did not let in much light. A few oil lamps guttered on the walls, soot staining the old stone above each one. Only every third was lit. The rooms were close together up here, with unadorned solid oak doors every few feet. Each had a number hanging on it, but nothing else to identify the occupants.

By now, people ought to be up and about, doing morning ablutions and lining up for breakfast. Aside from the guard, they hadn’t seen anyone in the halls. Maybe they served breakfast in bed here. Or breakfast locked behind one’s cell door, anyway.

Tolemek trod softly down the hall, his lock-melting vial of goo in hand. A long-suffering moan came from behind one door, and Sardelle paused and touched her fingers to the wood. With her senses, she could tell the person was a confused forlorn man sitting in a corner, his legs pulled to his chest as he rocked back and forth. His mind seemed disturbed by more than his condition, and she thought some drug or another might account for the hazy thoughts.

A notion of setting all of these people free strode through her mind. But what good would that do? They wouldn’t be able to escape or fend for themselves, not in this state, and she could scarcely set up a healer’s tent at the base of the hill.

You can’t help everyone.

I know. Still, Sardelle wondered if she might do some good in the half hour they had until that guard woke up.

You better help pirate boy, first. And you haven’t asked me about the third organization that might have been responsible for blowing up the archives basement. It’s even better than the last.

Does “better” mean more ridiculous sounding?

You know me well.

Tolemek stopped at the last door on the right and bent over the lock. Jaxi continued on as Sardelle walked toward him.

The Davaran Trinity, founded by three witches, swore to keep magic a secret through the centuries, knowing outsiders would fear them. They might be targeting you because you’re openly striding around the city on a soldier’s arm instead of hunkering in a thatched hut in the woods and tossing frog eyes and leeches into cauldrons.

The Davaran Trinity? Sardelle joined Tolemek in front of the door, where smoke was wafting from the lock. *That name sounds familiar.*

Yes, because none of the so-called witches in it had an iota of dragon blood in their veins. They thought they did and made all sorts of potions to inflict evils on people. Crazies like them are part of the reason there are so many unflattering images of sorcerers in people's minds.

Are you sure these were the most likely organizations in the book and not the least likely?

They were the only organizations started and made up of women. Only the Davaran Trinity is still rumored to be in existence today, or at least when that book was published. Fifty years ago, according to the creation date.

Just because we've only seen women doesn't mean they're not part of an organization that recruits both sexes, Sardelle pointed out.

Most of the other entities mentioned were brotherhoods or otherwise male-only orders. It seems men and women can't create secret organizations for clandestine purposes in unison.

We'll figure it out later.

Sardelle touched the door in front of them. "Are you sure this is the right room?"

"No," Tolemek said. "This is where she was last time, but it's been years since my visit—they forbade me to return after the last time, when I broke her out and stole her away to cure her… only to realize that wasn't within my powers." He scowled at the door, his fingers curling into a fist.

"I don't sense anyone inside."

Tolemek nodded, as if he had expected as much. "We'll have to sneak into the file room and look up her room number."

Sardelle wasn't aware that she made a strange face, but she must have, because he asked, "What?"

"I have a recent and awkward history with file rooms." She had been thinking about her attempt to convince Ridge, then Fort Commander Zirkander, that she was a legitimate prisoner in that awful mine, but Tolemek gave her a grave nod.

"I heard about the explosion in the archives building. If you need research done at a further point, you can ask me, and I'll do it for you." His expression grew wry. "My reputation may fade with time, but for now, it's quite effective at convincing people to leave me alone."

The offer surprised Sardelle, but she managed a, "Thank you," before he pushed open the door.

It revealed a dark room that smelled of paint, fresh paint. Odd. Had they moved the occupant, then painted the walls for some reason?

"You're right. There's nobody here." Tolemek sighed. The tiny

arrow-slit window faced north, and it was too dim inside the room to see much.

A clatter sounded back in the direction of the stairs. “Careful, Moshi, you’ll spill eggs all over me.”

“Because you were in my way. Mind your own platter, you big oaf.”

“Inside,” Tolemek whispered, stepping through the doorway.

Sardelle entered after him. Something clanked, tipping onto the floor, and Tolemek grunted. Sardelle rushed to close the door, afraid the sound would have traveled down the hallway. She hoped the guards would think it had come from one of the other rooms.

“What are these?” Tolemek grumbled. “Paint cans?”

Sardelle created a soft orange ball of light that shouldn’t shine too brightly to be seen from the hallway. She gasped in surprise at what it revealed. When she had been imagining a freshly painted room, she had assumed it would be of the same boring milky gray that adorned the stone walls in the hallway. But this…

Mouth agape, she turned slow circles, taking in the colorful fields, skies, lakes, mountains, and dragons painted all over the walls, ceiling, and even the floor. There must have been twenty dragons flying, striding, or swimming in the various scenes, all silver, all similar in features: the long tail, powerful torso, four legs with clawed reptilian feet, and wings familiar from cave paintings and illustrations of old, the figures magnificent even in the two dimensional form.

As beautiful as they were, something about seeing them here, now when Ridge had this mission to search for dragon blood, made an uneasy chill run up Sardelle’s spine. The two quests were unrelated—the king shouldn’t even know about Tolemek’s sister—so they couldn’t have anything in common, but it struck her as strange, nonetheless.

People have been painting dragons for centuries.

I know.

At least we can be sure the girl isn’t a member of the Heartwood Sisterhood. All the dragons would have spears through their hearts.

Thank you, Jaxi. You’re very helpful. Sardelle touched one of the paintings, where the great dragon seemed to be gazing out of the landscape and into her soul. “This is incredible. I wouldn’t have expected her—anyone in this privy hole—to have access to paints.” She looked at Tolemek, wondering if he had known this artwork was here or not.

He was scowling down at the paint cans. “My father isn’t a complete bear. He sent her paints and books. She always liked art.”

“Was she always this—” the word that came to mind was obsessed, but Sardelle changed it mid-sentence, “interested in dragons?”

“Not as a little girl, but in her teenage years, yes. She had painted a

couple of these the last time I was here."

Sardelle tore her gaze from that of the dragon. Tolemek was still staring at the paint cans. She sniffed, wondering if they were the source of the fresh paint she had smelled, but they didn't appear to have been opened yet.

"She's gone," Tolemek said numbly.

"Yes, but we can check the file room, and find out where they moved her. As you said."

He was shaking his head before she finished speaking. "She didn't get moved to another room. She was taken away. Why else would they be up here, preparing to paint over the murals? They probably *just* took her."

"You can't know for sure that they didn't move her to another room for some… administrative purpose." That sounded pathetic even as she said it. Obviously, his sister had been in the same room, one chosen with their father's approval, for years, for long enough to paint all of this. Why, indeed, would she be switched to another room after years in this one? "You believe they knew you were coming somehow?"

"Why else would she have been moved? Hidden?"

"I don't know, but maybe we should check that file room before making assumptions."

Tolemek stared at her for a moment, then nodded. "Yes."

He stepped over the paint cans and strode for the door, but stopped before his hand reached the knob. As with the rest of the room, the oak was covered in vibrant color. Tolemek was staring at… an image of himself. In the picture, he was clad in the sleeveless hide vest, shark tooth necklace, and spiky bracers he'd worn the first time Sardelle saw him, and the black ropes of hair hung about his face as they did now. A landscape unique to the door lay behind him, a dense tangle of jungle foliage such as one might find in Southern Cofahre or on the islands around the equator, perhaps even on Daguboor, the big continent in the Southern Hemisphere.

"Your wardrobe hasn't changed much over the years," Sardelle noted.

She was teasing and didn't expect the wide-eyed expression he turned over his shoulder. His bronze face had gone a few shades paler. "But it has," he whispered. "My hair was shorter the last time she saw me, and I wasn't wearing…" He looked thoughtfully toward the ceiling for a moment before deciding, "I had the shark tooth, but nothing else."

"Ah. There are seers among those with the gift, people who can sense what's happening, especially with close friends and loved ones, across hundreds or even thousands of miles."

"What about this?" Tolemek stepped back, revealing a portion of the door his body had been blocking, and pointed.

At the bottom of the picture, red paint spelled out, "Help me. They are taking me here."

. . . . .

Wan morning sunlight filtered through the camouflage netting the pilots had stretched over the fliers and onto the snow-dusted earth. Ridge watched the pattern of shadows and light on his gloved hand as he maintained a rigid single-armed push-up position.

"Seven," he said and lowered himself until his chest was an inch above the ground, then rose again.

"Seven?" Duck complained. "That was at *least* seventeen."

Duck, Ahn, and Apex were spread out in a circle, their bodies also in rigid push-up positions.

"We're not counting the ones we did on the other side," Ridge said. "Eight." He hated one-armed push-ups as much as the next person, but they made the regular ones seem easier than swigging beer, and the squadron had its athletics tests coming up next month. He would be remiss in letting training slide when they had time for it. And they had too much time, in his opinion. He hated sitting on his hands and *waiting*. They had moved the camp the day before, set up camouflage to hide the fliers, and were now back to waiting. "Nine. Ten. Eleven."

"Eleven?" Duck moaned. "Didn't you say we were only doing ten?"

"I don't remember announcing a number ahead of time. Twelve… you keeping up?" Ridge's own arm was starting to quiver, but what was new? He always ended up doing more than his body considered wise in these group exercise sessions. A squadron leader couldn't let himself look bad in front of the young pups.

"He's too busy complaining to keep up, sir," Apex said. "And it's rather pathetic considering *Ahn* isn't complaining."

Lieutenant Ahn's eyebrows were in danger of twitching, but she didn't respond.

"Ahn weighs eighty pounds," Duck said. "What's she have to complain about? Try putting a couple of machine guns on her back and see if that little arm can still do a push-up."

"*Little*?" This time her eyebrows *did* twitch.

"It's slender. I've seen you with your sleeves rolled up."

"It's proportioned. And I weigh more than eighty pounds."

Apex flexed his back. He might not complain, but his arm was quivering too. "Duck, did it ever occur to you to wonder why you have such a puny nickname, compared to Raptor?" He tilted his head toward Ahn.

"I assumed it was because of my swimming ability. I'm like a fish

out there."

"Something we never would have known if you hadn't crashed your first flier into the harbor twice. And then *complained* about how poorly it handled."

"How about we all stop talking so we can finish this set and don't have to stay like this all day?" Ahn suggested.

Ridge smiled. Ever the practical one. "Thirteen," he announced and led the team in a few more to bring it to twenty.

Duck collapsed.

Ridge felt like collapsing, too, but he pushed himself to his feet and walked out of their little camp, intending to check the steppe and the foothills behind them. He halted before he had taken more than a step out from under the camouflage. An airship floated in the air to the south, its dark wooden body and gray balloon standing out against the pale blue sky. He backed up a few steps and watched it from a hole in their netting rather than from outside of it.

"Problem, sir?" Ahn came up to stand beside him and answered her own question with an, "Oh."

"They're more than two miles away and shouldn't be able to distinguish our camouflage hump from the surrounding foothills."

"But?" she asked, correctly assuming he would say more.

"But we'll pack everything up and ready the fliers. According to our latest intelligence, this isn't one of their flight paths, commercial or military."

"Think they're looking for us?"

Remembering the aircraft he had shot down—and the one Sardelle's sword had utterly destroyed—Ridge nodded. "They may not know who's here exactly, but they know an enemy has been flying through their skies."

"Will we move the camp again tonight?"

"We'll see."

The more they moved around, the more chance they would be spotted in the skies, if not by official military watchers then by shepherds wandering around with goat herds. Everyone was a potential spy here.

The airship turned, heading toward the mountains. They weren't coming straight toward the fliers, but on their new trajectory, they would pass within a half mile of the camp. The white-and-tan camouflage netting worked great at a distance, but the closer one came, the less natural it looked.

Ridge faced Ahn and the others—Apex and Duck had both come to peer out across the steppes too. "Prepare to fly. We'll hope they don't discover us, but if they do, we have to be ready."

"Ready to run, sir?" Ahn asked. "Or ready to fight?"

Ridge stuck his hand into his pocket and rubbed the back of his dragon statuette. None of his people appeared daunted by the idea of battling an airship, even with only four fliers, but it was the mission as a whole that he had to consider. Right now, the Cofah might *suspect* an Iskandian incursion, but they couldn't know for sure yet. The empire had many enemies, and most of them had flight technology. But if they left an airship riddled with machine gun fire, and if witnesses identified him and his team, their chances of escaping the continent would go down. Even if they did escape, Iskandia risked retribution.

"If they spot us, we'll run first, try to lead them up into the mountains—" Ridge waved toward the craggy peaks north of the steppes, "—and if they follow, we'll fight them there. If we can force them down on a high mountainside or in a deep canyon, it'll take them a while to hike back to an outpost to warn the rest of their people."

"Would it be better if… everyone died in the crash, sir?" Ahn asked.

She wasn't lobbying for that, he knew, but she was pointing out the most logical scenario. If there was no one to report back, the Cofah would have no way of knowing what had happened out here, and it might be days or weeks before they even found their downed aircraft.

"It would be better if we weren't discovered at all." Ridge gazed toward the approaching airship. "As to the rest, we'll figure it out if they follow us and we manage to take them down. That's not a given, especially if their airship has some of those unmanned craft to throw at us."

"Would it be considered evil if a person would rather shoot at Cofah airships than go back to doing push-ups?" Duck asked Apex as they walked away.

"It would be considered egotistical, perverse and possibly psychopathic."

"But not evil?"

Apex frowned at him before climbing into his flier. "You're lucky you received as noble a nickname as Duck."

Ridge gazed out at the airship and took his cap and goggles out of his jacket pocket.

He had a feeling they would be flying within the hour.

Chapter 9

Help me. They are taking me here. The red paint strokes had been made hastily, with the last two words barely legible, a definite contrast to the precision of the murals.

"Wherever *here* is, it isn't anywhere around this part of the empire." Sardelle looked out the narrow window, toward the valley beyond, a valley cloaked in snow.

Tolemek was still staring at the painting, his fingers tracing the mural, his eyes searching. For more clues? "This could be anywhere. Well, not anywhere, but at least two continents and countless islands and smaller land masses." He pushed his hair away from his face; he looked like he wanted to tear it out.

"Not anywhere." Sardelle pointed at a rich purple cascade of bell-shaped flowers falling around a central stem. "This is a…"

Marsoothimum, Jaxi?

Yes. As a soulblade, Jaxi had traveled the world countless times with her previous handlers, and she had a memory that Sardelle never failed to envy.

"Marsoothimum," Sardelle said. "It's native to Daguboor and some of the islands around the northern horn. Some of this other foliage seems familiar too." *Know any of these other flowers, Jaxi?*

Just because I traveled the world, doesn't mean I ever had a handler interested in botany. Hektor used to eat flowers, but that's not the same thing.

"We can look them up," Sardelle said.

Tolemek stepped back. "I'll try to be optimistic and not think that all we've managed is to narrow things down to a continent. Or a lush greenhouse at any random point in the world."

"That's unlikely. We might be able to refine our guesses further later." Sardelle touched the three other flowers that were represented in enough detail to suggest they were real rather than random background creations. She tried to memorize them. If the marsoothimum was real, these other flowers should be too.

"I want to check the file room anyway," Tolemek said. "There might be a record of where they took her."

A clank sounded in the hallway, reminding Sardelle they weren't alone—and that there was an unconscious man in a downstairs closet who could wake up at any time. The two guards were the ones responsible for the noise, making their way closer as they delivered breakfast to the patients—or inmates, as she kept wanting to call them. A man in a nearby cell started singly loudly. The utterances piercing the walls were nonsense except that the word breakfast came out in every line. Judging by the indifferent attitudes of the guards, this was a common occurrence. Sardelle thought of trying to dig Tylie's location from their thoughts, but unless they were thinking about her, it would be hard to glean that information from their minds. They probably wouldn't have been told anyway.

Tolemek had his ear pressed to the door.

"They've both gone into a room if you want to try to sneak past," Sardelle said. It would be safer to wait until they were done serving breakfast, but that guard downstairs might wake up before then.

"Let's go." Tolemek slipped a leather ball out of his pocket and opened the door.

Sardelle walked into the hall after him. He slowed next to the open door—the obnoxious singing was coming from that cell—and glanced back at her before passing it.

"Can't he just eat without it being a dragons-cursed event every day?" one of the guards growled.

They were standing in front of the patient, feeding him by hand. A restraint jacket kept the man's arms secured around his torso. Sardelle nodded at Tolemek, and they slipped past the door.

They hadn't gone more than three steps when one of the guards said, "Who was that?"

Erg, he must have seen them out of the corner of his eye. Sardelle flicked a hand, unfastening the patient's restraint jacket. The man lashed out, knocking the breakfast tray from one guard's hands and leaping onto the back of the other. She raised a gust of wind and blew the door shut, then disabled the lock as she had done below.

"Go, go," Sardelle urged, shooing Tolemek toward the stairs.

His face was grim. He knew it wasn't likely they would have a chance to spend much time in the files room now.

"If you don't care if they figure out who was breaking in, head for the files room," she said as they ran down the stairs. "I'll keep them off your back while you search."

Tolemek turned left at the bottom of the stairs, running toward the front of the building instead of back toward the kitchen. Sardelle shook out her arms, loosening her muscles as if she were about to jump into a physical battle, and readied her mind for what might become a large-scale confrontation.

The main hallway was still empty, but four people were working at desks in the front room that Tolemek charged into. He tossed his leather ball into the middle of them, then backed out. Sardelle almost crashed into him, but she had seen the ball work before and realized what he planned. She scrambled back into the hallway, knowing the smoky air that wafted out would affect them if they were too close.

"Who are those people?" someone shouted.

"Get them!"

Despite the order and the ensuing footfalls, nobody made it to the hallway. A thump sounded as someone bumped into a desk, staggered, and collapsed to the floor. The other three people slumped unconscious before making it two steps from their seats.

Sardelle took the moment to destroy the locks in other doors off the hallway. There were more offices, furnace rooms, and storage areas down here, so there weren't as many doors to deal with as on the floor above. Still, it took a few minutes, and Tolemek had already charged inside by the time she finished. He must have a way to extinguish his device once it had done its job, because the smoke had already cleared.

Someone in the room across the hall had heard the shouts from the admins and had already discovered he was locked inside. He banged at the locked door. There were more people in that room. It wouldn't take long for someone to grab an axe or other heavy tool to force his way out.

Sardelle joined Tolemek inside a storage area full of shelves and boxes adjacent to the main room. He had already found a lantern and was skimming the labels. There wasn't another exit, so they risked being trapped inside.

"Here." He grabbed a box that wasn't as dusty as the others and tore off the lid. He flipped through the files and yanked one out. Two seconds of reading was all it took before he started shaking his head. "Transferred by order of the emperor. Two days ago."

"The *emperor*?" Sardelle wouldn't have thought the emperor knew of Tolemek or his family's existence. His dominion was a hundred times more populated than that of her homeland, and in all the stories and histories, he had always been a far more distant figure than the kings of Iskandia.

"It doesn't mean he personally gave the order." Tolemek stuffed the file back into the box. "It could have been one of the thousand-odd peons authorized to carry out the law in his name. There's nothing about where she was sent." He looked like he wanted to kick over one of the stacks of boxes, but he settled for slamming the side of his fist against a wall and striding for the door.

The bang of a pistol echoed from the hallway, followed by the slam

of wood against a stone wall.

"Someone found a way past my disabled door locks," Sardelle observed. It hadn't even taken an axe.

Tolemek poked his head into the hallway. They weren't far from the front door.

"Maybe there's still time to run for the exit," Sardelle whispered.

Tolemek jerked back inside at the same time as a gun fired again. A bullet smashed into the wooden doorjamb where his head had been.

"Maybe not," she amended.

"Guard the door," Tolemek said, slamming it shut. He locked it and shoved a heavy desk in front of it, then ran for the file room again, his hand dipping into his bag.

Concerned about what he was planning—so far he had proven he preferred non-fatal methods of dealing with people, but he was irritated now—Sardelle brushed across his thoughts. An image of an explosion flashed across the front of his mind.

"Uhm." She noted the four unconscious people in the main room with her, people whose only crimes were working in an inhospitable asylum. "You're not planning on bringing down the building, are you?"

"Just a part of it."

Footsteps thundered up the hall, stopping in front of their door. There were four people out there, and they were shouting for more to help them. The knob rattled.

Tolemek ran out of the file room, slamming the door behind him. "Can you make it so nobody can go out the front or through the kitchen for the next ten minutes or so?"

"I can try… so long as you're not blowing up the building in a way that people might be trapped and crushed inside."

His head tilted. "I'm not blowing up anything, simply removing a portion of the exterior wall."

That… wasn't what she had seen in his mind. "You were only *thinking* of blowing up the building?"

"That bit of fantasy might have crossed my mind, but, no, I'm not causing an explosion. Your sword is far better at that than I. Should I be offended that you were reading my thoughts?" His face grew a little sad, as if he knew she didn't trust him.

A dozen excuses popped into Sardelle's mind—it was one thing to snoop in another's thoughts and another to get caught doing it—but she admitted that she wasn't in the right here. "Yes, you should be. And I should be ashamed for doing so."

Guns fired in the hallway, and she dropped to a crouch, expecting bullets to plow through the wood. The oak was thicker than that though, and she made it to Tolemek's side without injury.

"Are you?" he asked.

"Am I what?" She was focused on the men in the hallway. One had an axe now.

"Ashamed."

"Yes. There are—*were*—a lot of rules about respecting people's privacy and not rifling through their thoughts. There are, admittedly, a lot of surface thoughts you receive simply by opening yourself up to those around you, but most sorcerers learn early on to block them out. It's amazing how tempted you are to break rules when there's nobody around to enforce them." An acrid stench reached Sardelle's nose. "Is that your work?"

"Yes. The doors?"

She lifted a hand and pushed her thoughts past the men knocking the hinges and doorknob off with their axe and to the front entrance. She broke the latch assembly so it would be stuck in the extended position. Such finesse was a little harder across a larger distance, and a twinge of pain started behind her eyes, but she managed to break the kitchen backdoor lock too. She would have a headache all day, but had doubtlessly needed the practice with fine-touch kinesis, anyway.

"Done," she said. "It's a good thing the windows are all too small to climb through." The idea of trying to break a hundred more locks made her brain hurt even more.

Tolemek led her into the file room, where a cold draft and a surprising amount of light greeted them. A large circular hole in the back wall now provided a window onto the snowy ridge beyond the building. The wall was more than six inches thick. Smoke wafted from the edges of the hole.

"You did that with a vial and an eye dropper?" she whispered, following him to the new exit.

"A flask and a specially treated wire brush, actually." Tolemek made sure nobody was waiting outside, then hopped through, landing in the snow. "I suggest we run."

Sardelle clambered through awkwardly, not wanting to touch the smoking edges with her hands, but took off at top speed as soon as she landed. They slogged through the snow, this time heading straight down the steep slope instead of bothering with the road.

"We'll have to steal horses," Tolemek said over his shoulder, checking on her and the looming towers of the asylum as well. "No trains in the station, and the guards down there are probably on their toes right now anyway, watching for vagabonds." He waved at the empty tracks running through the middle of the town.

"Not surprising." Sardelle sucked in large breaths of cold air. Plowing through the snow wasn't easy, and she stumbled more than once. "We might have to steal skis instead of horses. Or a dogsled."

“The main road into town has been cleared,” Tolemek said dryly. “The tracks too.”

“And where are we going with our stolen horses?” Sardelle was ready to return to Ridge, but she didn’t know if Tolemek would want to beeline for the nearest library to look up those flowers.

He hesitated before answering her. “Wherever she is, we’ll probably need airships or sailing ships—or fliers—to reach her.”

The fliers may not be available.

What?

The camp has visitors.

. . . . .

Ridge sat backward in the cockpit of his flyer, a spyglass to his eye as he tracked the airship through the holes in the camo netting. The craft was still sailing along on the same course, heading toward the mountains, but there was a lot of activity on deck. The soft *thwump-thwump-thwump* of its propellers drifted down from a thousand feet in the air. Its massive balloon blotted out the sun and much of the sky.

“I think they’ve figured out we’re in here,” Ahn whispered.

All of the fliers were packed and ready, everything except the camouflage stowed for takeoff. They would have to abandon the poles and netting and take it as a loss. Their propellers weren’t running yet —the noise would be a giveaway—but they could start them at a touch. The fliers’ glowing energy crystals were covered, so the light wouldn’t seep out. It shouldn’t be noticeable from afar in the daylight, anyway, but they couldn’t risk that something would glint or gleam. Even a spyglass reflecting the sun could be visible from a long distance away, and that would instantly tell those watching that something fishy was going on inside the mound tucked into the base of the foothills.

“Maybe not,” Duck whispered. “They haven’t stopped. They’re still floating toward the mountains.”

They hadn’t stopped, but they weren’t moving at anything near their full speed. And all those people running around on deck made Ridge nervous. He slid into the cockpit, fastened his harness, and rested his fingers on the propeller ignition button. He ought to give the order to fly right now. Only his knowledge that the greater mission was at risk of failing if the fliers were discovered stayed his hand. More than that, Nowon and Kaika would be at risk if the soldiers guarding the installation were alerted.

Still, he had a hunch they were in trouble if they didn’t move.

“It’s time,” Ridge said. “We’re taking them on.”

“Are you sure, sir?” Apex asked.

He was going to have to be. Ridge mashed on the ignition switch,

and his propeller ripped to life. “Follow me,” he said, then remembered to tap the communication crystal to activate it. Otherwise his people wouldn’t be able to hear him over the noise of their own propellers roaring to life.

He rolled toward the break in the camo net at the back, a gap large enough for the fliers to escape through. He almost knocked over a pole, but squeezed past without dropping the netting. The last thing he needed was to get his propeller tangled in his own camo.

“They’re launching something,” Ahn shouted.

“Aircraft?” Ridge asked, thinking of the unmanned fliers. He cleared the netting and jabbed the thruster switch. A steep slope rose right ahead of him, so there was no time for a runway-style takeoff.

Explosive, came a warning in his mind. *Get out of there.*

“Move,” Ridge barked, not questioning the sword. “It’s a bomb! Out, now!”

He was already in the air, angling up and away from the Cofah craft—he had wanted to pick up speed and come in from above rather than risking its guns from below, but he craned his neck, trying to spot the bomb.

“I hit the gods damned pole,” Duck said.

“Don’t worry about the netting,” Ahn said. “Go straight up.”

Cold wind scraped across Ridge’s cheeks and whipped his scarf about, but he spotted his target. The bomb. He swooped toward the falling cylinder, firing and hoping. If the airship hadn’t been so far above them, there never would have been time, but if he could catch it as it dropped through his sights…

He wasn’t sure he hit it until it exploded with an ear-splitting boom. A fiery sun filled the sky above the camo mound, shrapnel flying in every direction. Ridge ducked as he flew through the explosion zone. Shards slammed into his windshield, and glass cracked. The camo netting itself had been close enough to the blast that it caught fire, and flames leaped up from what had appeared to be a mound of earth a moment before.

He wondered if he had been responsible for hitting the bomb or if the sword had helped him.

That was you, hero. Our flier got out, so I was worried more about what’s going on up there now.

Our flier. Ridge supposed it was good that Jaxi, secured beneath the back seat, considered herself in the same predicament as he even if she might survive an explosion.

Might?

Knowing he would be a target to the airship above him, Ridge didn’t take the time to respond. He banked and picked a weaving route through the air. He also checked on his people as he swooped

about.

"Did everyone get out?" he asked, searching the sky. There was Ahn and Apex… "Duck?"

"Over here, sir." Duck sounded miserable, but he sounded alive too.

Ridge finally spotted him. He wasn't in the air—his flyer was bumbling and rolling across the snowy steppe, a portion of the netting tangled in his propeller. "Figure that out and get into the air, Duck."

"Yes, sir." So that was what mortified sounded like.

Ridge streaked into the air, knowing he would have to distract the airship for a while before his team could form up and fly north, as he had planned. His lack of preparedness embarrassed him. He should have known all along that the Cofah would spot them. What a mess.

A cannonball screamed over his wing, reminding Ridge to focus on the fight and worry about being embarrassed at their showing later.

Jaxi—what did you mean earlier? What is *going on up there now?*

He didn't get an answer. He would have to see for himself.

With his unpredictable zigging, he dodged three more cannonballs on his way up. He finally climbed above the airship, firing rounds at the big gray envelope as he rose. He had a look at the deck on his way up and tried to guess what might have been worrying Jaxi. He caught a glimpse of something in the back near the cabin—several large metallic somethings, but the balloon blocked his view before he could identify them.

Duck's flier had shaken free from the netting and found the air, more than a mile out over the steppes. It would be a couple of minutes before he circled around and got into the fight, but Ahn and Apex were rising behind Ridge, also evading the cannons firing in their direction.

"Keep the men on deck busy for now," Ridge said. "Remember, we don't want to bring it down until we reach the mountains. Finish your coffee and join us, Duck."

"Very funny, sir."

"It's my wit that keeps me in the general's good graces." Ridge left a few holes in the airship's balloon, then dove down to follow his own instructions. He aimed at the gunners manning the cannons, but even more, he wanted a look at those metal machines. Were they some kind of new weapon?

A circular disk spun out from an unusual launcher on the aft deck. Ridge avoided it easily, but it surprised him by exploding in the sky. Even from twenty meters away, the force rocked his flier. He kept control, but a cable moaned ominously.

"Watch the disks," he said. "They're bombs."

Ridge looped upward, then flipped and came down again, this time gunning for the man hurling those disks. His bullets strafed the deck,

and his target ducked down behind the big artillery weapon. Ridge shot at it, hoping he might cause one of the disks to explode.

"The Cofah have been busy upgrading their weapons this past year," Apex observed.

"They could have had the technology for a while," Ridge said, not taking his eyes from the launcher he was targeting. "They're probably trying things out at home before revealing them to us."

"Or maybe they just think we're so unimportant that they don't bring their best equipment when they attack our homeland," Ahn said.

"I don't have a problem with that," Duck said. "I have trouble enough with our own equipment."

"So we see."

One of Ridge's incendiary bullets found the ammunition pile. The explosion demolished the launcher and blew away a chunk of the deck and railing.

Before he could congratulate himself, a grim-sounding Ahn spoke. "Those are fliers. Manned ones this time."

"Four of them," Apex added.

Ridge banked, turning away from the smoke and fire he had created, and coasted along the length of the airship, closer than he should have dared—he wanted to see what his pilots had seen. Yes, the metallic contraptions he had glimpsed earlier had wings, bodies, and propellers. These must be the new Cofah fliers he had heard about. They were in motion, too, rolling along the deck, toward an opening in the railing. They were picking up speed to take off, using the airship as a launching pad.

A number of Cofah warriors with rifles were racing toward Ridge's side of the deck. He turned his belly toward them and flew down and away. They weren't going to catch him gawking. A few bullets streaked in his direction, but they missed as he bobbed and dipped.

"Now's the time," Ridge said. "Head north. Let them think we're afraid of them."

"Afraid?" Duck said. "I can't wait to see what they can do."

"This from the man who got his propeller tangled in his own camo netting," Apex said.

"Well, I wasn't planning on challenging them personally. I thought I'd fly around, distracting them so Raptor can tear into them with her guns."

"What are you going to do to be that distracting?" Ahn asked, rare amusement in her voice.

"Haven't you seen me in the annual Harvest Show? I juggled pumpkins last year while flying with my foot."

"Yes, that was the *third* time you ended up in the harbor." Ridge took point, and the three other fliers fell into position beside and

behind him. “We didn’t put that one on his official record, since he was flying in some retired festival plane for a private businessman, one who will be carrying more insurance for future festivals, I understand.”

“The flier was still perfectly serviceable after the event,” Duck said. “And it wasn’t as if I crashed. Water landings are a legitimate option. The passenger fliers that take the doctors around in the country do them all the time.”

“Those fliers have floats instead of wheels.” Ridge twisted to look behind him. The four Cofah craft were in the air and had formed a modified arrowhead formation, not dissimilar to that of Ridge’s own squadron. He wondered if the empire had studied Iskandian techniques. Either way, the enemy fliers were coming after them, and it looked like the airship was giving chase too.

“A minor detail,” Duck said.

“They’re not as fast as us,” Apex said. “They’re falling behind.”

“Ease back a bit. Let them think they can catch us. In fact…” Ridge fished in the emergency supply kit fastened to the side of his seat. He pulled out a flare, lit it, and tossed it into the foot well of the seat behind him. It would fall out as soon as he flew upside down, but in the meantime, a stream of gray-blue smoke poured from the end.

He wobbled his wings and started dipping, then pulling back up, as if he were having trouble controlling the flier.

“That’s an act, right, sir?” Duck asked.

“Yup, pretending to be a little injured.” By now, the snow-covered steppes had turned into snow-covered mountain slopes, with thick stands of evergreens blanketing the hillsides below. They flew over a craggy ridge, and more peaks rose up, along with numerous rocky cliffs and crevices. “I believe I’m going to have so much trouble that I nearly crash in that canyon.”

“You want us to go in with you, sir?” Ahn asked.

“Keep flying and see how many of them take the bait. If they all swoop down after me, you’re welcome to help.” Ridge wanted a close look at one of those fliers. The intel he had heard placed some kind of fossil fuel as the source of their power, and he wanted to know if that was true, or if this dragon blood might be responsible for the manned Cofah aircraft too. This might not be the intelligence the king had sent Ridge’s team to retrieve, but it was the kind *he* cared about. General Ort would care too.

“But if only three swoop down after you, you’ll be fine?” Ahn asked dryly.

“Use your discretion, Lieutenant.” Ridge was approaching the canyon, so there wasn’t time for greater discussion. “Just don’t lose track of the airship. Gunfire is irritating, but one cannonball could

knock us out of the sky."

"Understood, sir," Ahn said, and the others responded with, "Yes, sir" as well.

"Time to make this look good," Ridge muttered.

Ridge jerked on the stick a couple of times, ducking and rising, like a man struggling to stay horizontal. In the end, he lost the battle and dipped toward the canyon, tailspinning as smoke streamed up behind him. Between rotations, he glimpsed the other fliers against the blue sky. One veered away from its formation to follow him.

He felt a little indignant at the lone stalker. Even injured, shouldn't the Cofah consider him, the infamous Colonel Ridgewalker Zirkander, dangerous? Maybe they didn't know he was the pilot. He wasn't in his usual craft, after all.

Does Sardelle find that arrogance appealing?

Even though the sword had been in his head earlier, Ridge flinched at the intrusion, nearly scraping his wings off on a cliff wall.

Sorry.

"It's fine," Ridge said, regaining his concentration and moving farther from the rocks.

"Sir?" Ahn asked.

"Nothing."

As he abandoned the tailspin and leveled off, he reminded himself that he could talk *silently* to the sword. He headed back the way he had come, hoping the Cofah flier would enter farther up the canyon. He sailed toward a shadowy ledge blown bare of snow; it might be dark enough to hide the bronze of his flier from someone sweeping in from the top, especially if that someone was looking up canyon. He slowed down and activated the thrusters, so he hovered over the ledge.

I keep the arrogance inside my head where it doesn't bother most *people*, Ridge informed the sword as he watched the blue slice of sky above the canyon. It made him a little nervous that he couldn't see the rest of his pilots, but he wanted to spring this trap, and he trusted the others to take care of themselves for a couple of moments.

Now that you have more people poking around in your head, you should watch your thoughts.

Thanks for the advice.

Here's some more: I'm not an expert on engineering, but their engines look to be near replicas of yours.

Bastards. Ridge barely kept the curse from spilling from his lips.

And they're powered by little vials of dragon blood.

Hells, are you sure? Where are the Cofah getting *all of this blood?*

I could only speculate, but I'm imagining a dragon working with them. Or imprisoned by them, though it's hard to imagine how humans could

hold a dragon against its wishes. Their power, magically and physically is —

Ssh, Ridge thought. The Cofah flier had come into view. Ah, and there was a second. They weren't streaking recklessly into the canyon but following cautiously. They were wary of him after all. Good. That would make this more interesting.

Interesting will be when you realize the repercussions for shushing a soulblade, Jaxi grumped.

Focused on the fliers, Ridge barely registered the comment. The Cofah craft dipped into the canyon, flying in the direction he had been heading when he had disappeared from their view. They would look behind them, but it was hard to keep track of enemies on one's rear, especially enemies located lower than one's own flier.

When the two Cofah craft were committed to the search, flying side by side in the narrow canyon, Ridge switched from thruster to propeller power and took off after them. He stayed below them, putting himself in their blind spot, believing their inexperience would allow him to sneak up on them. Of course, he was gambling on inexperience due to the newness of the Cofah fliers. He couldn't let himself get too cocky or make too many assumptions.

His nerves jittered as he crept closer. Coming in for the kill, as his old flight instructor would have called it. Except this wasn't some slow-moving airship; these craft were much more maneuverable, something demonstrated by the way they glided up and around the contours of the snowy canyon, rock formations, bends, and sometimes dipping low to follow the frozen river meandering below, its banks just visible beneath the layers of white. Watching them was surreal; if the craft had been painted bronze instead of black, Ridge might have believed them to be from his own hangar.

His thumb massaged the trigger of the guns. Almost time.

The drumming of the propellers echoed off the canyon walls, his own melding with theirs. One of the pilots glanced back. Ridge didn't think the man saw him, but he must suspect a tagalong.

Ridge angled his nose up, toward what should be the engine area of one of the fliers, and fired. He pounded several rounds into the rear of the craft before both pilots reacted. His target pulled up, doubtlessly intending to fly upside down, make a loop, and come down behind Ridge. Having performed that maneuver countless times, Ridge knew it well and he followed, but let himself pummel the second flier with rounds on his way by.

The Cofah pilot's face was obscured by goggles and some kind of head wrap, but Ridge knew what the angry shaking of a fist meant. The man was yanking a pistol out as Ridge zoomed upward beside him. He better focus on his flying, or he would end up smashing into

that rock formation coming up. Not Ridge's problem. He corkscrewed upward, flying parallel to the canyon walls for a moment, then angled away in time to fire at the first craft. Bullets ripped into the hull near the cockpit, and the pilot ducked, his head disappearing from view. A ribbon of smoke flowed into the air behind his craft. It should already be done for, but Ridge circled to come in again to make sure—and to make sure the other pilot hadn't figured out an effective attack, either.

He needn't have worried about that flier—its distracted pilot had flown it into the rock formation. Or maybe the damage Ridge had done on the way by had stolen its ability to steer. Either way, he only had one flier to finish off, and he cut in mercilessly, targeting the engine again. The smoke streaming behind the craft doubled. The pilot was trying to land, but there was nowhere safe in the rugged canyon. His wing clipped a cliff wall, and the craft spun out of control, then bashed against the cliff again and tumbled to the snowy floor.

"Sir, the airship is veering away, but we're having trouble with our —" Ahn grunted, cursed, and resumed, her voice tense. "If you have any suggestions on how to deal with the rockets, we'd appreciate it, sir. Duck is—" the screech of some projectile whistling near her cockpit drowned out the rest of the words, and she didn't speak again.

"Ahn?"

Ridge zoomed for the top of the canyon, needing to see what was going on up there. Rockets? What rockets?

"Ahn, give me your status when you're able. Or Duck or Apex." He kept his voice calm, but their silence filled him with anxiety.

He twisted in his seat to look in all directions as he neared the top of the canyon. If he had dealt with two fliers, and the others were having trouble with one, that left one unaccounted for.

As soon as he crested the lip of the canyon, he spotted it. It was flying along the rim and zipped by so close, it almost gave him a haircut. The other pilot jerked in his seat, as surprised to see Ridge as Ridge was to see him. They were heading in opposite directions, and Ridge banked to turn back toward the other flier without hesitation. He expected the Cofah pilot to do the same, to want a fight with him, especially if he hadn't seen what happened to his comrades in the canyon, but the man kept flying in the direction he was already going. Ahead of him, the three Iskandian fliers were playing cat-and-mouse with the other Cofah craft, weaving in and out around a pair of craggy mountain peaks. Ridge couldn't understand how one lone enemy flier could be giving his people so much trouble, but he gunned his flier to gain ground on the craft that was now ahead of him. His people were in the sky still; that was enough for now. He would get the news later.

The pilot ahead of him jerked his arm and fired something large, much larger than a bullet or even a cannonball. The sleek oblong

projectile leaped into the sky with such power, that a recoil coursed through the craft, making it shudder and buck. For a moment, the pilot struggled to bring his flier under control again. Ridge couldn't understand what he had been firing at—the four craft darting around the peaks were too far ahead to hit—but he arrowed in, hoping to take advantage of the pilot's brief struggle. A few more seconds, and the Cofah flier would be in range…

But the large projectile did the impossible. It curved off its trajectory, banking in the sky like an aircraft. By now, Ridge ought to expect the unexpected from these dragon-blood powered contraptions, but he found himself gaping in stunned disbelief anyway. Until the projectile—the *rocket*—arced a full hundred and eighty degrees and spun through the sky toward him.

"Anyone want to enlighten me on these new Cofah weapons?" Ridge asked, nudging the nose of his craft to alter his course.

"If you haven't seen one yet, be glad," Duck said, his voice quick, almost breathless.

"I'm seeing one now. It's heading right for me and—" The rocket was adjusting course to keep him in its sights—if projectiles even *had* sights—and it had already closed half the distance. "Talk later," he said, knowing he'd need his full concentration.

"Yeah," came Duck's response, grim and full of understanding.

Ridge made a more abrupt correction to his course this time, pitching downward. The canyon was still running along the craggy hills beside him, but he didn't know the terrain and didn't want to get himself stuck with a rocket on his butt. He headed straight for the ground, as if he meant to crash. He kept one eye on the terrain and one on the rocket, which was tilting toward the ground, too, toward him.

He brought his nose up before he hit the trees, though he came close enough that the air from his passing knocked snow off the boughs. The rocket arrowed toward him, its nose aimed straight at the front of his craft. The trees ended, and he dropped even lower, skimming along rock and snow. The rocket filled his vision, its black snub-nose as appealing as a viper's fangs.

Ridge waited until the last second, timing it… timing it… and jerked the stick to the side.

The rocket tried to adjust at the last second, too, but it wasn't quite fast enough. It darted past Ridge's wing, so close he could have read the model number engraved in the side if it hadn't been moving so fast. He expected it to hit the ground—that had been the whole idea—but he didn't expect the cacophonous boom that filled the air, pounding at his eardrums even as the shockwave pounded his craft.

His flier spun out of control, the tail flipping over the nose twice, a

wing cracking against the ground. Ridge was jerked around in the cockpit like a puppet on strings. His head slammed against the side, his leather cap offering poor protection. If not for the harness, he would have been thrown free. He almost wished he had been. He tried to regain his senses, to recover somehow and get the flier into the air again—or at least bring it to a stop before it destroyed itself, but the lip of the canyon loomed before him. He'd been flying so close, and he had turned in that direction… He was going in if he couldn't bring the craft to a stop. And it was a long fall to the bottom.

Suddenly, his flier slowed and stopped striking the ground. It righted itself and rose into the air as if someone had snatched it from its mad tumble. Ridge knew that wasn't *his* doing, but he was so disoriented that he couldn't guess what was happening. He wasn't even positive he was alive.

The flier came to a halt and floated over the lip of the canyon, the ground on one side and a fall of two hundred feet on the other. He hovered there. He hadn't activated the thrusters, had he?

My apologies. I thought your maneuver would be sufficient. I didn't realize the projectile would explode.

Jaxi? Ridge touched his head, wincing at a lump already swelling beneath his cap. There was blood dripping down the side of his face too.

Are there other swords that speak into your mind?

I don't think so. But I can barely remember my name right now, so I'm an unreliable source. He twisted to look behind him, looking for the spot where the rocket landed. It wasn't hard to find. A huge crater scarred the ground, with trees uprooted and thrown free all around the circular depression. He was lucky to be alive.

Remembering that he hadn't shot down that flier before it launched its weapon, he jerked his gaze to the sky. *Where's the other pilot? The Cofah?*

His flier fell into the canyon.

Ridge, his mind still a knot of jarred confusion, could only ask, *What?*

I should say his engine exploded, and then his flier fell into the canyon as a result of that. I wasn't sure I could do that—dragon blood isn't flammable, as I found out, but that oily stuff you put in the engines—what do you call it?—that is *flammable. Very flammable.* If swords could cackle, Jaxi did.

We call it oil. Ridge slumped. His head and body ached and he owed his life to a sorcerous sword. Not his skill or cleverness or… anything.

Remembering the rest of his people, who were also facing rockets, Ridge sat up straight. Self-flagellation would have to wait for later.

Can you help the others?

A second explosion shook the mountains before Jaxi responded. An orange blaze lit the sky like a small sun. Two bronze Iskandian fliers flew out of the explosion, heading in his direction. His fist clenched. Good. But the third? Where was the third? He didn't see the Cofah craft, either. A small comfort if he had lost a squad member.

"Nice shot, Raptor," Apex said.

"Thank you," Ahn said. They both sounded exhausted. Harried.

"Duck?" Ridge asked.

"I'm here, sir," Duck said. "Just escorting that Cofah flier into a nice mountainside back here. That black paint makes the hull look real good all smashed into the snow. Not sure that goat appreciated us a-visiting, though."

"Visiting," Apex said. "There is no grammatical reason to add extra letters or syllables to the word."

"After what we just went through, you're lecturing me on my word-making?" Duck's craft finally came into view, flying out from behind the mountain.

"The goat asked me to."

Jaxi, can you lower me to the ground? I need to see if this craft can be made airworthy again. I'm assuming I'd drop right out of the sky and into that canyon without your assistance. His sudden ability to hover without thrusters would be difficult to explain to the others as well.

Correct.

Thank you for your help, he added as his mangled flier floated to a flat stretch of ground and settled onto its wheels. Lopsidedly.

Sardelle would have been weepy and inconsolable if you'd died. I probably should have helped earlier, but these mechanical contraptions are beyond my experience. It's also possible your comrades would have found it suspicious if the enemy craft spontaneously combusted before their eyes.

Possible, yes.

"Your flier isn't looking good, sir," Duck said. "My wing was clipped, too, and I'm a little wobbly. Should we land or try to catch the airship?"

"Is it still in sight up there?" From the ground, Ridge couldn't see over the trees. "I was too busy crashing to see what it was doing."

"Last I saw it, it was flying behind that peak over there. It probably kept going. So much for crashing it in here."

Ridge sighed. So much for this whole mission. He should have taken his people's role more seriously from the beginning. But how could he have anticipated these new aircraft and weapons?

"Sorry, sir," Ahn said. "We should have split off and someone should have come to help you when we saw we only had one on our butts, but that one fired that crazy rocket…"

“Each of their fliers was loaded with two rockets,” Apex said. “Ahn discovered that her sniper rifle was ineffective for destroying them, but that the machine gun works. For the record, Duck and I tried to discover that, too, but our aim was imprecise.”

“My aim was perfectly precise,” Duck grumbled. “It’s not my fault the rocket kept moving out of the spot I was aiming at.”

“Find places to land,” Ridge said. “We’ll run checks and see who’s damaged and how much. I’m afraid this flier might not be airworthy again, not without an engineer and a box of spare parts.” Neither of which they had out here. He cursed softly. How was he going to get all of his people out if they were down a flier?

“Yes, sir.”

Ridge unfastened his harness and climbed down. His legs were shaking after the crash, so he was glad he had a moment to compose himself before the others joined him. He removed his cap and goggles and slumped against the side of the craft. An icy wind blowing off the mountaintops batted at his scarf. He shivered, his body slicked with cold sweat, as if he had run a marathon instead of simply sitting in a chair up there.

After the others landed, the buzz of propellers faded from the mountains. He considered the sun, hoping it would drop quickly up here and that his people would have the darkness of night to hide them while they did repairs. That airship, and possibly many of its friends, would be back before long.

The airship hasn’t left completely.

Ridge straightened immediately. *What? Where is it? Is it coming this way?* He opened his mouth, ready to order his people back into the air and already feeling a surge of anguish that he might not be able to follow them.

It’s heading west, but it’s leaving a message.

A message? Ridge thought of the rockets. Could the airship be equipped with launchers too? Just because it hadn’t used them on their first pass didn’t mean it didn’t have them.

It’s a literal message. Interesting how a sword could make its telepathic words as dry as someone could with a voice. *Might want to climb a tree.*

Ridge didn’t feel like climbing anything, except maybe into a bed, but he didn’t want to miss whatever lovely message the Cofah had for him. He found an aspen tree with most of its trunk bare and only the snow-covered branches at the top obstructing the sky, creating a latticework he could see through. He unfastened his belt, encircled the trunk with it, and looped the ends around his hands and gripped them. With his boots braced against the trunk, he slid the belt up a couple of feet at a time, his legs following. As he advanced toward the

treetop, his movements shook the thin branches overhead, and clumps of snow pelted his shoulders and head.

You could have just told me what the message said, Ridge thought, though he didn't know if the sword would be listening.

Yes, I could have floated you fifty feet into the air, too, but would you have an answer when your people asked how you got up there to read it?

They're not here yet. He wasn't sure where they had landed, but there were limited spots among the trees.

Yes, they are.

"Whatcha doing, sir?" Duck called up.

But by now, Ridge had climbed high enough to see the sky to the west. The airship was a mere speck on the horizon, and the message it had left in smoke was already being blown apart by the wind. He could still read it, though, and it made him drop his head to his chin, a great weariness filling him.

Your spies are dead. Leave or you're next.

Chapter 10

Sardelle and Tolemek slogged across the snow, cloaks pulled tightly around their bodies and hoods tugged low over their heads. Night hugged the mountains, and after traveling all day, they both needed sleep. After Jaxi's warning, Sardelle had wanted to fly back to Ridge's camp with all speed possible, but they'd had little choice but to return the way they had come: first on train, then on horseback, and finally on stolen snowshoes when the drifts grew too deep for the horses. Jaxi was directing them to the new camp, where the pilots were doing repairs as quickly as possible so they could move before the Cofah returned. Sardelle worried she and Tolemek—who had scarcely said three words since leaving the asylum—would arrive only to find out the others had moved on.

They're still there. I'm helping Mr. Cranky fix his flier.

Mr. Cranky? That couldn't be Ridge.

He's not cranky with his troops, but he's cranky with me. I'm not sure he appreciates my comments in his head, even though I did *save him from falling into a canyon yesterday.*

Is it the fact that you're commenting that he doesn't appreciate or the fact that your comments are sarcastic and frequently exasperating? Sardelle was starting to regret initiating telepathic communication with Ridge. She hadn't realized Jaxi would take it as an invitation to chat with him at every opportunity.

Please, I'm only infrequently exasperating. You can't believe the restraint I exercise. I could comment on every*thing you people do. As to the rest, if you didn't want me to chat with him, you shouldn't have left me in his flying contraption.*

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Tolemek stopped on the snow-socked hillside, gazing up at the mountains fencing them. They had been on a trail at one point, but Jaxi had assured Sardelle this was a shortcut.

"We're close to their camp," she said.

"That didn't quite answer my question, did it?"

"Jaxi is certain we're going the right way."

Tolemek grunted and continued up the slope. Sardelle caught the

scent of woodsmoke on the breeze. She hoped that meant they were close, but wondered if Ridge would allow fires when enemy airships might be about.

They're using the flames to melt pine pitch to use in their repairs. It's extremely primitive. Ridge did not find it helpful when I informed him thusly. Perhaps the pirate scientist can help them come up with a superior glue.

Sardelle was beginning to see why Ridge might be cranky with Jaxi. She and Tolemek crested a ridge, and she expected a campfire to come into view, but she saw nothing but trees, a canyon in the distance, and a strange crater. Ah, wait. There was a hint of magic in the air.

I'm camouflaging them from anyone who might happen by.

Does Ridge know?

It's the reason he's risking the fire. I'm being very helpful. I told him I could have camouflaged his camp before if he had only asked. That netting they were using was troublesome when they had to leave. A far inferior product to what a sorceress can craft with her mind.

Ridge doesn't know what your abilities are, Sardelle reminded Jaxi. *And he's being careful with our secret.*

There are only the two pilots that don't know about you. Perhaps it would be useful to bring them into the fold, so we can use our power openly to help them.

Perhaps so. I'll discuss it with him. Sardelle thought Ridge trusted all of his pilots, but she didn't know Duck or Apex well yet, and was reluctant to simply walk up and inform them she was a sorceress.

Tolemek stopped. "I… sense something out there." He gave her a curious look.

"It's the camp. That's good that you detected Jaxi's handiwork."

Not that good. It makes me doubt my touch. Am I growing old?

Ancient. But you shouldn't be surprised. You said yourself he has a lot of innate talent. It's a shame we didn't find the sister. I'm curious about her.

Aren't you going to keep looking for her?

Yes, but it sounds like we need to help Ridge and his team first.

Jaxi had summarized the aerial battle, as well as the message the airship had left in the sky. The fact that the Cofah had all of this dragon blood and were using it to build weapons that would inevitably be used on the Iskandians… It was disturbing. This wasn't just about helping Ridge. Her whole continent was in danger.

Between one step and the next, the view changed. What had appeared to be nothing more than trees turned into a cleared area with two fliers in it. Two others hunkered behind a copse of aspens farther back. They appeared fine, but the closer two fliers had black

tarry spots over their bronze bodies and patches on the wings. Dozens of dents and scratches marred the hull, and the number of broken branches and pine needles carpeting the surface suggested the propeller had recently doubled as a wood chipper.

In the shadows, Lieutenant Ahn leaned against a stump with a rifle cradled in her arms. Sardelle hadn't noticed her at first, but had a feeling Ahn had noticed *her* hundreds of meters away. The two other lieutenants were standing by a large fire, one adding branches and one stirring the contents of a makeshift pot—was that a tin Cofah helmet? Ridge was straddling the most damaged flier, and he waved a pitch-covered stick at her when she looked at him.

"Tolemek," he called. "Do you have any interesting goos that could help with repairs?"

"Possibly," Tolemek said. "I'll take a look in a moment." He drifted over to Ahn first, giving her a hug and sharing a few quiet words with her.

Apex was on his way to gather another load of firewood. He glared at them, but didn't say a word.

Sardelle knew she shouldn't distract Ridge with secret conversations, but, remembering the way he had teased her about helping Tolemek first when they'd both been knocked down, she touched his mind with a question. *Should I be jealous that you're more excited to see him than you are to see me?*

No, because that's not the case. It's just that I can't leap from my flier and smother you with kisses while everyone is watching. Also, I might get pitch in your hair if I tried. His humor sounded tired and forced. He was weary, but there was more bothering him. The loss of the two captains must weigh heavily on him. Maybe he felt responsible in some way.

"You didn't find what you sought?" Apex asked, walking back into camp with a couple of big branches. He addressed Sardelle instead of Tolemek.

"What we sought had been moved," Sardelle said.

Ridge finished working on the flier, at least for the moment, and climbed down. "Apex, that's enough wood. Everyone, let's have a quick meeting around the fire."

Sardelle wouldn't have minded sitting down after the long trek through the mountains, but the camp lacked seating unless one wanted to climb up into one of the cockpits. Tolemek and the pilots gathered around the flames. Sardelle resisted the urge to lean against Ridge's arm, instead standing a couple of feet behind him.

"If the Cofah can be believed, Captains Nowon and Kaika are dead," Ridge said.

"If they can be believed?" Ahn asked. "You think they were lying, sir?"

“They were precise with their message—two spies—so I think they found our men, but… it’s possible they’re holding them for questioning and that they’re not dead yet.”

Ahn nodded grimly.

“If there’s a possibility that they’re alive, I don’t want to leave them in there.” Ridge looked at Sardelle for a moment. Did he think she could answer as to this possibility? Her senses couldn’t extend more than a few miles. Even Jaxi probably wouldn’t be able to see all the way to the city or outpost where they were being held. “There’s also the original mission,” Ridge went on. “If we leave now, having lost the cargo we were supposed to deliver *and* take home again…” He didn’t mention the colonel he had left on a road by the sea, but that had to be in his mind as well. “If we leave now, then this entire mission was for nothing.”

“But we’ve learned some good intelligence, sir,” Duck said. “All about this dragon blood and what it can do.”

Ridge grunted, clearly not impressed by this tiny snippet of information.

“If we continue with the mission, we may end up facing a dragon,” Sardelle said. “All of this blood must be coming from somewhere.”

“Maybe Tolemek has some nice dragon-slaying potion in his kit,” Ridge said.

Tolemek snorted. “Lizard-slaying, maybe.”

“What I want to know,” Apex said slowly, his eyes toward Tolemek, “is why he wasn’t surprised by the revelation of Nowon and Kaika’s death—or capture. Whatever it turns out to be.”

Because Jaxi had told Sardelle about it the day before and she had told Tolemek. But she couldn’t explain that in a logical, believable way to the pilots who didn’t know about her or Jaxi.

Tolemek raised his eyebrows. “After three days of traveling, I am too weary to react to much of anything.”

Ahn, standing arm against arm with Tolemek, narrowed her eyes at Apex.

Jaxi told us, Sardelle told Ridge. She wouldn’t have shown a visible reaction, either, but Apex hadn’t been watching her, only Tolemek.

I gathered. Ridge spread a placating hand. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is what we do next.”

“Wait, sir.” Apex raised his own hand, palm spread. “It *does* matter. We haven’t talked about it, but don’t you find it suspicious that those Cofah airships were waiting for us when we first flew onto the continent? And then that watchtower knew to search the skies for us.”

Duck snapped his fingers. “That’s right. They’ve been all over us like ants on fried chitlins since we got here. How did they know we were coming?”

“It has occurred to me that someone may have leaked information about our mission,” Ridge said, “but I don’t see how it could be Tolemek, since he didn’t know anything about it until the afternoon before we left. The news couldn’t have traveled here any faster than we carried it, so it would have had to have been sent ahead of time by someone else who had knowledge of the king’s plans.”

“Unless the news traveled by sorcerous means,” Apex said.

Several people shifted uneasily and frowned at him. The statement made Sardelle uneasy, too, and she waited to see if Apex would look at her. Had he figured out what she was? He was supposed to be an academic. Was he observant? Someone who had deduced that she wasn’t the archaeologist Ridge had described her to be?

Apex *did* give her a long look, but when he pointed, his finger extended toward Tolemek. “I’ve been reading up on some of the alchemical formulas he’s made, and while he doesn’t publish the ingredients or his methods—” he scowled as he said this, as if it were some crime, and maybe it was some academic faux pas these days, “—I am extremely skeptical that some of his potions could be viable without some sort of otherworldly influence.”

Ahn’s fingers curled, as if she was thinking of plowing a fist into Apex’s nose, but she didn’t say anything. Maybe because she knew Apex was right. Sardelle had suspected Tolemek had some dragon blood at their first meeting, and Jaxi had confirmed that suspicion early on. Oddly, Tolemek himself had never suspected until Jaxi had informed him.

“I thought your specialty was archaeology, Apex,” Ridge said quietly, “not alchemy.”

“It doesn’t take an expert to sniff out fishy science.”

“Wait,” Duck said, “are you saying Deathmaker is a witch?”

“Witches are women, aren’t they?” Tolemek murmured to Ahn. He sounded more amused by the accusation than worried about it. He probably thought he could handle Apex, no matter what came up.

“You’re asking me?” Ahn muttered. “I don’t know the details.”

Sardelle could have explained the correct terminology, but she didn’t want to call attention to herself, not when this was the topic.

“We’ll keep an eye on everything,” Ridge said. Nothing about an eye on *Tolemek*. He must truly believe his pirate scientist wasn’t to blame. His reasoning had been logical, but maybe he had someone else in mind. “In the meantime, I want your opinions on the mission. I feel I have to carry on with it, but if two of our elite troops were captured, there’s a possibility we might fall to the same fate. I’ll ask for volunteers. Anyone who’s not comfortable going can wait out here. Or fly back with the information we have. Duck’s right; what we’ve learned does need to make it back to the general.”

"I'll go," Duck said. "I thought you were picking us for this possibility all along."

"I was," Ridge said.

"Then what're you asking for volunteers for? We're with you, sir." He waved at Ahn and Apex.

Ahn nodded once. Apex was still glaring at Tolemek.

"Is *he* going?" Apex asked.

"He and Sardelle have unique talents that will be extremely useful if we're sneaking into a highly guarded facility, especially if that facility is on the alert because of the failure of our first team. They know we're out here. They'll be ready for us."

Sardelle was glad he hadn't asked for the details of the incursion into the asylum. They might have gotten in and out, but she couldn't imagine anyone calling that smooth. An image of that guard coming to and running down the hallway with the mop bucket chained to his wrist came to mind.

"Unique talents, sir? Like what?" Apex asked.

Ridge looked into Sardelle's eyes, a question there, though he didn't form any thoughts in his mind.

Guessing what the question was, she did it for him. *You want to tell them?*

Do you object?

I think it's going to come out anyway, if we're sneaking in together. I'll be hobbled if I have to worry about not letting them know.

"Magic," Ridge said.

Apex's expression was somewhere between vindication and betrayal. "You *knew*, sir?" He flung his hand toward Tolemek.

"That Tolemek's potions are witchy?" Ridge asked. "No, I just figured that was science and engineering. I was actually referring to Sardelle. I didn't bring her along because she's a good history student."

All of the stares leveled in Sardelle's direction made her uneasy, but she kept her chin up and tried to look wise, helpful, and not particularly witchy, since they all considered that something vile.

"I thought she was here because she'd be better at keeping your bump stick warm at night than Colonel Therrik." Duck rubbed his head. "Are you saying she's… a witch?"

"A sorceress actually," Sardelle said. "Witches tend to be poorly trained, often self-taught, and sometimes completely bogus insofar as having an actual aptitude for magic. I was formally trained." She decided not to volunteer the how and where, since that would take some time to explain.

"You *knew*, sir?" Duck whispered. "And you're still…" He groped in the air, and Sardelle waited to see if the term "bump stick" would

come up again. She hadn't heard that one before. Amazing how much the slang for such things changed in three hundred years. "Or is that all an act? Are you two pretending to be a couple, and you're really —" His fingers flexed in the air again. The poor kid was having trouble finding a piece that would fit into his puzzle. "Does the *king* know? Are you *spies*?"

"If Colonel Zirkander is a spy, then I'm a spotted tiger shark," Apex said.

"Your confidence in my ability to suss out information on the sly is disappointing, Apex," Ridge said.

"It's not the sussing I'm questioning, sir; it's the not talking and joking about what had been sussed." Apex wrinkled his brow. "That didn't make sense. I'm as befuddled as Duck usually is, right now." He looked at Tolemek and Ahn. "But I see I'm the only one. Once again Deathmaker seems to already have this information. And, Raptor, you don't look surprised, either."

"I was extremely surprised on a night a few weeks ago," Ahn said.

Apex shook his head and stumbled away from the fire, mumbling something about firewood.

"I'll help," Duck said and jogged after him.

Sardelle touched the back of Ridge's hand. *Is it wise to let the two of them go off together?*

"They'll figure out what they think and if they want to go with us. Each of them may be useful, but I wasn't lying earlier. Someone *should* get this information back to Iskandia. On the chance…"

"We fail utterly?" Tolemek asked.

Ridge shrugged.

"I'm not failing before I find my sister. I don't know why they've moved her, but if the message she left me is true, I know they didn't simply send her back to my father's home. She's in danger because of me, and I'm not going to die in some forsaken wilderness when she's waiting for me to help her."

"Does that mean you don't want to come on this mission?" Ridge asked. "You and your tools would be useful, but it's not your quest. I understand that."

Tolemek looked down at Ahn. She wasn't whispering in his ear or making any facial expressions that suggested she would be disappointed if he didn't come, but he may have seen something there that Sardelle didn't. "I'll go," Tolemek said.

"Good. Ahn?"

"Yes, sir. I'm in."

Ridge gave Sardelle his tired smile. "I hope you're still in too."

"Yes, but can we talk for a moment?" She clasped his hand—and found some of the sticky pitch he had mentioned earlier.

His smile flattened with I-told-you-so wryness.

Tolemek and Ahn had already moved away from the fire, and the two lieutenants were talking—their voices occasionally rising in anger or exasperation—off in another direction. Sardelle didn't have to lead Ridge far to find a private spot.

She dusted snow off a log, sat down facing the fire, and unfastened the snowshoes. Icy air whispered off the mountaintops, licking at her skin, and she pulled her cloak tight. She had a trick for heating blankets, usually reserved for sick patients, that she might have to employ the next time they had a sleep break. Whenever that was. Dawn was only an hour off, and Ridge would want to be gone before the sky brightened. There was a Cofah airship that knew where they were, and it would have had time to reach a base and gather reinforcements by now.

Ridge sat on the log and put an arm around her. For a moment, Sardelle allowed herself to feel amused that Duck had thought their romance had been an act. Everything else was an act. This was the one true thing. Or was it? Would she truly be considering leaving him if she cared for him? She recaptured his free hand and clasped it in hers. Yes, it was *because* she cared that she was considering it.

Really? I thought it was because you were being cowardly and didn't want to face that secret organization.

I have no problem facing organizations. I just don't want to ruin his career. His life.

Yeah, yeah, why don't you ask him what he thinks about your career-ruining presence and let him decide for himself?

That's… actually somewhat logical, Jaxi.

You needn't sound so surprised. I've been witness to thousands of matings.

Thousands? Either your former handlers were extremely randy, or you have a voyeuristic streak.

If swords could smile, Jaxi did.

Ridge's gaze had drifted toward his flier—he probably needed to get back to the repairs. "Is there something you were wanting to talk about? Or has your time away with a boring and introspective pirate left you aching for someone fun to cuddle with?"

Sardelle thought about defending Tolemek, but he hadn't been a very talkative companion. She might believe Ahn didn't find him boring—she wasn't that talkative, either, so maybe they enjoyed spending time together in silence—but Sardelle preferred Ridge's playful teasing.

"Can we trust them?" Sardelle tilted her chin toward the arguing lieutenants. "Or can *I* trust them, I should ask. I know they won't plot against *you*."

“No, their military indoctrination should keep them from plotting hijinks against a superior officer.”

“Hijinks aren’t what I’m worried about.”

“I don’t think they’ll risk my ire out here. Once we get back… Enh, that’ll probably be the least of my problems when I get back. If I don’t get court-martialed for kicking out Therrik, I’ll probably get demoted for tarring up the mission.”

“How are you responsible for what’s gone wrong?” Sardelle asked. “Was that colonel likely to make the captains more effective?”

“Not from what I gathered, but he’ll be back there, slobbering all over the king’s ear while I’m out here, underestimating Cofah pilots and nearly crashing into canyons.” He lowered his voice. “Your sword saved my life.”

“I know. She’s quite pleased with herself.”

“I feel like an idiot. I was overly confident. I wasn’t even thinking about the potential of special dragon-blood weapons when I saw those Cofah fliers. And after what we’ve already seen, I should have been. But I assumed the pilots would be green compared to my people—compared to *me*.” His hand flexed and he made a disgusted noise. “Apex is right in that the Cofah seem to have an uncanny amount of data on our whereabouts. I don’t know if there’s a snitch somewhere or if it’s something else they can do with that blood, but I have no reason for overconfidence out here.” He scuffed at the snow with his boot. “Sorry, we were supposed to be talking about your concerns, not my… The dragon usually gets this.”

Sardelle blinked. “The what?”

“You know, my little figurine.”

“You, ah, talk to it?”

“Not *to* it,” Ridge said, “but I pace in circles and talk to myself.”

“While you’re holding it.”

“Yes.” He squinted at Sardelle. “I’ve told you before, this isn’t that odd. Not any odder than what other pilots do. The job makes us a little crazy. All of us.”

“Of course. I understand. And I’m not mocking you.” She squeezed his hand, but couldn’t help adding, “Do they have asylums in Iskandia these days? Or is that only in Cofahre?”

“I think so, but it wouldn’t be within your rights to admit me, unless you were my wife. Even then, I think I’d have to do more than get caught talking to myself.”

Unless she was his wife… He was joking, but the words made her pause and dwell on the possibility. Did he want that? Did she? She shook her head. She had better bring up the first discussion first, though commenting on his jokes was easier. “Even if you’re rubbing your dragon while you’re talking to yourself?”

"Yes. Er." His brow crinkled. "We're still talking about the statuette, right?"

"*I* was."

"Good. Yes. Me too."

She snorted softly.

Ridge leaned closer and kissed her on the cheek, his lips warm against her chilled skin. "Thank you. I don't know if it was your intent, but you've taken my mind off glum thoughts."

"I'm glad, but…" Now it was Sardelle who poked at the snow with her boot. "Some of this court-martial concern of yours… You've made some choices others might question, and you've been put in some compromising situations lately as a result of me—of knowing me and having me in your life."

Ridge gave her a suspicious squint. "Did someone tell you about the vine at the castle?"

"The what?"

That's an entertaining story. Definitely get that from him.

"Nothing," Ridge said. "Go on."

Hm. "I like your company very much—"

His eyes widened with surprise—ugh, did this sound like the beginning of a we-need-to-go-separate-ways speech?

"—and could easily see living with you for many years… or all of them. But I'm afraid I'm getting you in trouble. That you're making choices you wouldn't usually make if you weren't trying to protect me. I was wondering…" She wasn't sure what expression was in his eyes now. She was having a hard time looking at them. "Maybe I should leave for a while, until I've dealt with the people spying on me and your life returns to normal. You have the respect of your people, your superior officers, your king, your pilots… I don't want you to lose any of that because of me."

"Sardelle."

She risked meeting his eyes. He didn't look mad or stunned or devastated, but he did look like he was trying to figure something out. Or figure *her* out.

Good call, genius.

Hush.

"Is this allowed?" Ridge asked. "Talking about leaving right after you teach me to mind-talk and invite your sword to waltz into my head whenever she feels like it?"

"Uhm." She didn't know what to make of his humor, not this time. A defense mechanism? A sign that he didn't understand the ramifications of what she'd asked? No, he wasn't a dull man, even if he hid behind that I-just-like-to-fly-and-shoot-things persona.

"I assumed that was a sign that a marriage proposal was

imminent," Ridge said, "or at least that I was worth sharing your innermost secrets and abilities with."

"Marriage proposal? Are the women supposed to do that now? It was always the men in my time." She stopped talking, lest it turn into battling. The topic flustered her. He wasn't seriously suggesting he'd *want* a proposal, was he? No, it was a joke…

"It can come from either sex."

"I assumed I'd wait for you to ask. You instigated our first evening together, after all, even though I'd scarcely known you for three days at that point."

"*I* instigated?" Ridge asked. "You were the one fondling my chest. If that's not an instigation, I don't know what is."

"I was bandaging your wounds."

"There were wounds? Huh, I'd forgotten. Odd which details about a night different people remember, isn't it?"

Sardelle shoved her shoulder against him but smiled anyway. Maybe this was the only answer to her concerns she would get tonight.

But Ridge sobered and dropped his voice again—the others had looked in their direction at the mention of sex, even if they had been using the gender sense of the word. "Listen, Sardelle. My life has never been normal, and I make dubious choices all the time. I was doing that long before I met you. Ask anyone. No, ask General Ort. He would be happy to give you a list. Or show you my file. All three inches of it. I'm just impulsive and not very disciplined. There aren't many branches of the army where I could have made it more than five years without being bounced out on my a— my lower cheeks, as you call them. I knew that from the beginning. The only reason I joined was because I wanted to fly. That's all I've ever wanted to do. I've put up with the rest of the discipline and chain-of-command cra—wait, do you have a polite civilized word for, ah, fecal droppings?"

"I think you just found one."

"Enh, it doesn't have a very forceful ring. Anyway, what I'm saying is that I've put up with the army because the army keeps me in the air. The only reason the army puts up with *me*, is because I'm good up there. Usually." He grimaced. "The king's good graces mean less to me than they probably should. I see him as a man, nothing more, nothing less. I see everyone that way. I don't like failing—that claws at me—and if I'm dreading a court-martial, it's because I know that in this case it will be deserved, but it's the having failed that will bother me, not the opinions of others."

Ridge slumped down on the log, leaning his elbows against his knees. Sardelle thought about putting her arm around him, but rested her shoulder against him instead. He stared thoughtfully down at his

hands. “As long as I can fly, that’s what makes it worth the early mornings, the horrible chow, the physical and mental exams, the long work weeks, the days off only when it’s convenient for the army to let you go, which is next to never. It’s the flying that makes everything else workable. But if there was another way… I’ve been thinking off and on, ever since you mentioned that you might be able to *make* a power crystal.”

He glanced at her, and she gave a nod. She hadn’t tried yet but thought she could.

“Maybe I wouldn’t *need* the military to have a flier,” Ridge said. “I have engineer friends; we might be able to build one from scratch. Even if you couldn’t make a power source, or it was too dangerous to, now there’s this dragon blood… Just seems like all of a sudden there are options. And I’ve wondered what it would be like to go off after my dad on one of his crazy world-exploring missions while he’s still alive. I’ve wondered what it would be like to fly all over the world, really. See it all from the sky. Maybe skipping the empire, since my head is apparently adorning bounty posters here. But if we weren’t at war with the Cofah, and there were another way to keep flying, I might have retired already. That crossed my mind while I was being flown out to those prison mines, let me tell you. But I figure it would be cowardly to leave as long as the Cofah are a threat and I’m able to keep fighting. But I suppose if the army kicked me out… I wouldn’t feel all that bad about it. And if something happened where I had to leave to help protect this particularly fine lady, I wouldn’t feel all that bad about that, either.” Ridge wiggled his eyebrows at her. “I know you don’t need my protecting, but I’d at least like to be able to take my cloak off and lay it across a mud puddle for you, so I can feel useful. I’d do that, by the way, if we ever get somewhere without snow and you’re wearing sandals instead of boots.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Sardelle should have said something more meaningful to his sharing of dreams, but she sensed that he wasn’t being completely straightforward with her. Aspects of the military might irritate him, but he loved his job and the officers who worked under him. He wasn’t ready to retire, not unless they made him choose between that or a desk job. And he didn’t want to fail or to lose the admiration of those he cared about. That mattered to him. He *liked* being a war hero, even if he waved away the attention and pretended it didn’t matter. He even believed it didn’t matter to him. Perhaps this was a case of Sardelle being able to sense things in him that he wasn’t being honest to himself about. He would be devastated if his career was taken from him and if he was ostracized. On some level, he knew that; he had to. That he wanted her enough to bury those thoughts… she appreciated it, but she feared he would come to

resent her one day if she was the one who, however unintentionally, ruined his life.

She stared bleakly at the ground.

"Anyway," Ridge said, flexing his clasped hands and returning his gaze to them. "I can't read you the way you can read me, so I don't know how you truly feel, but I want you to know that if you're looking for an excuse to leave, you don't have to give me a story. Just say that's how it is, and I'll understand. I'll drink myself into a stupor and pine horribly for days, but I'll understand. You're like an eagle, and I'm a crow, and it was probably strange in the beginning that we got all lustful in that cave—I'm still sure that was because of you fondling my chest—but I've been enjoying flying with you, so if you're really just worried that you're affecting my reputation or my career somehow, please don't be. I won't go so far as to say I don't care at all about those things, but at this point in my life, I'm ready to care about someone else… more."

That was a truth, a whole truth.

Sardelle wiped at the corner of her eye. A lump had grown in her throat while he was speaking, else she might have protested his notion that she was an eagle or any sort of magnificent bird or animal. She didn't trust her voice though, and when he gazed over at her, she put her hands on either side of his face and kissed him.

It did seem unfair that she could read him when he could only guess at her true thoughts. She didn't know if it would alarm him, but with the touch of her lips, she tried to share her feelings and emotions with him as well, things that were too hard to prove with words, that she didn't want to leave him but she would never forgive herself for wrecking his life. She also admitted that she was afraid sometimes that she had attached herself to him too soon and with too much zeal because he had been the first nice person to walk into this new life of hers, a life she was still struggling to accept fully. He had been like a life preserver on a rough sea, and she had clung on with more fervor than she usually would have when meeting a man. But at the same time, she knew if they had met three hundred years ago, she would have wanted to explore a relationship with him then too.

She shifted so she could slip her fingers beneath his jacket, running her hand up his waist and around to his back, enjoying the contours of his hard muscles, wanting to slide over into his lap and feel more of him. Yes, falling for him would have been easy in any time period. He was handsome, charming, playful—

And he does that thing with his tongue.

Jaxi!

I'm only interrupting because some people have noticed you're using this log for more than a bench, and it's almost dawn.

Is there a Cofah airship on the way?

Nothing close enough for me to sense. Yet.

Good. Now, go away.

Sardelle would have gone on kissing Ridge for a few more minutes—or hours—and who cared who was watching, but for all his words about being indifferent to what happened to his career, he had a more developed sense of duty than she. He broke the kiss first, though his eyes didn't leave hers. The intensity—the heat—in them made her wonder if he might suggest running off into the woods instead of attending to any sort of duties, but he eventually sighed and leaned back farther. "That is… compelling," he breathed, his voice husky.

"Do you mean, ah, did you sense… me?" Very eloquent, yes. But she didn't want to say she had been trying to foist her emotions onto him if it hadn't worked. Just because he understood her words when she spoke with her mind didn't mean the rest would come through.

"Some fears, concerns, something about a life preserver, but I was mostly talking about the end where you were thinking lustful thoughts about my… back."

She blushed—those hadn't been the feelings she had been trying to share.

He caught her hand when she pulled it out from beneath his jacket, giving it a kiss before releasing her, his eyes holding a promise of later. He eyed the sky, which was no longer as dark as it had been, and the camp—contrary to Jaxi's warning, the others were doing a polite job of *not* looking in this direction. "Looks like it's time to go. Are you ready to storm a secret Cofah compound?"

Chapter 11

Ridge tucked his spyglass into a pocket and picked his way down the spruce that he had been using as a viewing platform. He grimaced as sharp needles scraped his cheeks and branches thwacked him in the back of the skull. He still had a knot back there from the crash. He probably should have given the tree-climbing job to someone else, but after moving the fliers, the squadron had hiked all afternoon and was approaching the coordinates for the secret Cofah facility, and Ridge had wanted to see for himself what awaited.

From the ground, it had almost looked like a forest fire was burning beyond the snowy ridge ahead, because plumes of white-gray smoke rose from numerous spots, drifting up into the clear evening sky. Thanks to his elevated perch and the spyglass, he had found the real reason for the plumes.

When he dropped to the ground, all eyes turned to him. The group was taking a break, resting and waiting for night to fall.

"Fire?" Apex was sitting on a log, with his pistol and weapons cleaning kit out.

"Not fire," Duck said, his boot up on the end of the log. They had been having the same discussion when Ridge had gone up the tree. "Smell the air," Duck added. "It's got sulfur in it."

"So does the air above your bunk at night, but that doesn't preclude a fire in the stove."

Duck didn't look like he grasped the joke. No matter. Ridge wanted to share what he'd seen, not break up a fight.

"It's steam, not smoke," he said. "Looks like a lot of hot springs and geysers. One of the little ponds started shooting steamy water twenty, thirty meters into the air while I was up there watching. There were a lot of spots like that. There's a big mound, almost a mountain, in the middle that might be manmade. At the least, it's been excavated by man—there are some metal doors set into one side, big enough to be hangar doors. I'm not sure how easy it is to get to them. I didn't see a road, and there are a lot of those steaming pools."

Tolemek, who was leaning against a tree near Sardelle and Ahn, nodded. "I thought that might be the source of the smell and the

steam. We've gone west far enough to reach the Taiga of Boiling Death."

"Boiling *Death*?" Duck asked.

"I haven't been here myself, but they say swimming isn't recommended. The geysers and pools will scorch your skin off. Even some of the streams run so hot that nothing can live in the water. Just traveling through the nearby forest can be dangerous, because in some spots, there's nothing more than a thin crust over scalding water. If you break through it and fall in, you can get burned to death."

"Burned to death?" Ahn asked. "You don't have a goo to fix that?"

"I did bring some of my healing salve along, but it's not *that* powerful."

"Boiling Death, huh?" Ridge asked. "Sounds like a cozy place for a secret base."

"There are people in the mountain," Sardelle said, "Fifty or sixty. Jaxi isn't positive, but thinks some are guards and some are workers. Researchers or engineers. She says there's a *lot* of dragon blood in there. She can sense it."

"Thank you." Ridge appreciated the intelligence, but he took note of the concerned looks Duck and Apex shared. Maybe he should have sent them back in one of the fliers with an intelligence report for the general, but that would have left them a pilot short, and they had both volunteered to stay with the mission anyway. He was still battling with the decision, though, knowing that someone had to survive and that this intelligence *had* to make it back.

We'll survive, came Sardelle's determined whisper in his mind.

He had grown used to that more quickly than he would have imagined. Maybe because it was her, and she was the one person he didn't mind having secret conversations with. The sword was another story.

"Uh, who's Jaxi?" Duck asked, apparently dwelling on Sardelle's report.

"My sword." Sardelle drew the weapon from its scabbard.

"It… talks to you?" He licked his lips, eyes big as he stared at it, then glanced around, like he might flee into the woods at any moment.

"She talks to just about anyone who's willing to listen," Sardelle said.

"And some who aren't," Ridge muttered. "Duck, you want to go scout for me? See if there's a way out to those doors? If anyone can scamper around in a forest and avoid pools of boiling death, it ought to be you."

Duck wore a doubtful expression, but he said, "Yes, sir."

"Want me to go with him, sir?" Ahn asked. "Watch his back? Or

pull his butt out of the boiling river when he falls in?"

Duck sniffed. "I don't need anyone to pull me out. I'll be better on my own. You city people are so noisy when you walk in the woods."

"Noisy will be you when you fall into a geyser and start screaming," Ahn muttered.

Duck waved dismissively, grabbed his rifle, and headed off through the trees. Scouting, Ridge assured himself, not fleeing from Sardelle. Duck's speed and the way his shoulders were hunched up to his ears made it seem like the latter, though.

"What constitutes a *lot* of dragon blood?" Tolemek asked. "Is it possible there's a whole dragon inside their base?"

"Jaxi doesn't believe so," Sardelle said. "I think even *I* would sense a dragon at this distance."

"Hm." Something about the set of Tolemek's mouth suggested disappointment.

Ridge would prefer *not* to battle a dragon, so he couldn't share that feeling. "Everyone else, get some rest. We've all been up too long. A couple hours of sleep before attempting an infiltration would be a good idea." Or a couple days of sleep, but they couldn't take that long. The Cofah would be looking for them. He was worried about the fliers too. With Jaxi's help, they had found a large cave to hide them in, so the craft wouldn't be visible to patrols roaming the skies, but leaving them behind without a guard made him nervous. "We'll wait until after midnight to attempt to sneak in. With luck, most of those guards will be snoozing in their racks by then."

Ridge sat on the same log as Apex and flexed his ankles. He wondered if he would be *able* to rest. It was hard to relax while thinking about getting past pools of "Boiling Death" and wondering how and where Kaika and Nowon had been captured. He had watched for tracks in the snow as they drew closer to the coordinates, but he hadn't seen anything except signs of animal activity.

The others had already tossed down their packs, and it didn't take long for their bodies to follow. They had come down out of the mountains, so there was less snow here, but the journey had still been a taxing one. Ridge didn't know if they would have made it without Sardelle along, melting passages through canyons and pointing out less treacherous routes. It had seemed a good way to introduce Duck and Apex to her magic, having it be used in a simple way that assisted the team. Apex hadn't seemed that surprised at what she could do and what she was—maybe he had figured it out a while ago—but Duck kept staring with goggle-eyes and making reflexive hill-folk signs for warding off evil witches.

"Ahn," Ridge said, "since you're in the volunteering mood, why don't you take watch while Duck is off exploring?"

"Yes, sir." She took her sniper rifle and disappeared into the trees. She wasn't the wilderness expert that Duck was, but she could sneak around in any terrain without being spotted.

Soon, everyone else found their rest positions and the little clearing fell silent, save for the soft rasp of a bore brush being pulled through a pistol barrel. Every now and then, Apex glanced in Tolemek's direction as he cleaned his weapon. Tolemek had tossed his pack against a tree, its skirt sheltering the base from the snow, and was lying against it, his repose hardly threatening. If he was aware of Apex's dark glowers, he was ignoring them.

Time to address this, Ridge supposed, though he doubted he could do anything to change the lieutenant's feelings.

"Are we going to have a problem before this mission is over?" he asked softly.

Apex flinched, perhaps surprised to have been caught glowering so obviously. "Before it's over? No, sir."

"*After* it's over, then?"

Apex scowled down at his disassembled pistol. "No."

"Would you tell me if you were thinking of doing something as foolish as the things I sometimes do?"

Apex hesitated before answering. "No."

"I'm not in love with the man, either," Ridge said, "but seeing what we've seen so far here makes me believe the king did the right thing in hiring him. Instead of shooting him. Whether it's fliers, weapons, or scientific advancements, we dare not fall behind the Cofah. They already have the advantage of population and resources. He can help us."

"We already have good scientists, sir. Men who've never *murdered* innocent people." Apex shook his head. "It's not even murder when it's a whole village. It's, it's *genocide*. It's a crime that can't be forgiven." Apex wasn't keeping his voice that low, and Sardelle glanced over. Tolemek turned his back on the conversation. Ridge doubted that meant he wasn't listening. He must be aware that Apex had a weapon in his hands and was glaring at him.

"Who was it you lost?" Ridge asked, though he'd read Apex's record and knew.

"My brothers and sisters and I had all moved away, but both of my parents were still living there. And I knew…" Apex jammed the brush into the barrel again, even though there couldn't be a speck of carbon left inside. "It was a small town. I knew everyone. The Kraytons had just had a new baby. The Pargrats' little girl… They were good people. All of them."

"I'm not going to be his advocate—you'd have to talk to Ahn for that—but my understanding is that he made the weapon but wouldn't

have used it, not like that. Someone betrayed him and unleashed it on Tanglewood and on a Cofah town as well."

"So that makes it less of a crime? Even if that's true, he still made it. He chose to make it. There's no reason to make something that horrible, not unless you're a, a *monster*." Apex threw his brush down and snapped the pistol back together.

Ridge had a hard time disagreeing, but said, "Maybe it wasn't a wise choice, but we're giving him an opportunity to do some good with his potions now. He can help us, and maybe in doing so save lives that would otherwise be lost."

Apex stared at the weapon in his hands. "That doesn't bring back my parents or anyone else in my village, sir."

"I know."

"You know that old fable, about the forlorn tiger, sir?"

Ridge held back a groan, knowing he would get a story. Apex had received his nickname when he had been flying a general up the coast to a meeting, and they had been attacked by pirates along the way. In the midst of an aerial battle at five thousand feet, he had started illustrating a point by quoting historical figures and sharing an obscure myth. The word had gotten around, and other former passengers had mentioned similar experiences—even if pirates hadn't always been involved. This had earned him the sobriquet Story at the Apex. Since the communications crystals had been installed, the entire squadron had been treated to some of these mid-flight tales. "No, go ahead."

"The tiger knew there were poachers in the forest, men that were dangerous because of their rifles. They shot the elephants, but the tiger didn't do anything, because elephants lumber around and rarely bother speaking with tigers. And then the poachers shot the wolves. Maybe the tiger could have done something, but he really didn't care about wolves. They were competition on the hunt. When the poachers returned, they shot the buffalo. Again, the tiger did nothing, because it was a beautiful sunny day, and he didn't want to leave his warm ledge on the rocks. Then one day, the tiger returned home to find that his mate had been shot by the poachers. He was infuriated and tried to round up the forest creatures to help him rid the world of the poachers, but by now, there was nobody except him left to fight. He knew he couldn't take the poachers by himself, so he slunk away, never to be heard from again."

Sometimes the points Apex tried to make with his stories were clear. Sometimes, they left Ridge scratching his head. "So Tolemek is the poacher and you're the tiger?"

The pistol drooped in Apex's hand. "I'm not anything, sir. I'm just afraid that if I do nothing because it's inconvenient or I'm worried

about the consequences, and if nobody else does anything, either… then evil is allowed to roam the earth."

Ridge sighed. He had already tried to convince Apex that Tolemek wasn't pure evil, and he didn't know what else he could say.

"He's not a subject, is he?" Apex asked after a moment of silence. "Just an expatriate living on our soil? He might even still be down as a war criminal. Would it still be…" Apex glanced at Tolemek's back and lowered his voice to a whisper. "If I shot him, would it be punishable by death or imprisonment? Would my career be over? I've studied a number of legal systems from historical societies, but haven't paid that much attention to ours. Is that odd?"

Ridge had guessed Apex might be thinking about revenge, but it disturbed him to know the lieutenant had been seriously mulling over the ramifications. It made sense, Ridge supposed. A younger, brasher man might act without considering the consequences, but Apex was old enough to know better. Still, there was something chilling about one of his men so logically debating whether or not to murder someone. He opted to lighten the conversation. "No, the modern ones are complicated and the law books are exceedingly boring to read. Military justice books are especially dry. I'll spare you the story about why I had the task to read several chapters once—and write essays on them."

Apex didn't smile. So much for lightening the conversation.

"He's not a subject, nor has the king granted him provisional citizenship, but he does have a protected status. I don't want to lose you, Anders," Ridge said, using the lieutenant's first name for once, "so I hope you're not seriously considering murder."

Apex flinched again. Maybe he couldn't believe he was considering murder, either, but saw it as the only acceptable path for revenge. Or justice. Yes, that might be more what rankled him than anything. The fact that Tolemek had been responsible for so many deaths and was allowed to walk freely in the very country where he had killed hundreds. And nobody was *doing* anything about it. Maybe he felt he had to be the one.

"If you can't find another solution for your heart, maybe you can challenge him to a duel," Ridge said.

"Dueling is illegal, sir," Apex said glumly.

"Among soldiers and officers, yes, but not among civilians." Granted it had fallen out of fashion over the last couple of decades, with the Iskandians busy fighting off invaders and frowning upon anything that caused young men, men who could be defending their country, to be killed foolishly.

Apex lifted his chin and gazed into the forest. "Perhaps, hm."

When he didn't say anything else, Ridge patted him on the shoulder

and walked away. He didn't know if he had solved anything, or merely postponed the inevitable, but he hoped Apex would at least avoid shooting Tolemek in the back in the middle of Ridge's mission.

Ridge's mission. He snorted as he headed over to check on Sardelle. His self-appointed mission, maybe. Wasn't he just supposed to be the flying rickshaw driver? How had he ended up taking responsibility for this?

I believe it started when you drugged that officer and punted him out of your flier.

Jaxi. Ridge frowned at the intrusion—and at the fact that someone besides Sardelle was privy to his private thoughts. *Everyone is resting. Don't you need naps too?*

Not at all. Sardelle is sleeping, though, so I thought I'd inform you directly.

Inform me of what?

The man floating above the mountain base in a balloon.

Ridge halted, his foot halfway between one step and the next. *What?*

A man is sitting in a basket under a balloon and looking out at the land around the mountain with a large spyglass.

Ridge sighed. He'd been thinking of lying down and cuddling with Sardelle—and maybe doing some of that very interesting kissing where he could tell what she was thinking, especially the part about her imagining him naked—not heading back up a tree, but he grabbed his rifle and left camp.

"Problem, sir?" Ahn called softly from behind some snow-covered ferns. In the darkness, he hadn't seen her.

"Maybe. Want to come take a look with me?"

She slipped out of the brush and joined him. He opted for walking toward the crest of the hill that lay between them and the start of the steaming pools instead of climbing a tree. Someone up in a balloon might spot some strangely moving branches. Especially if that someone was on the alert and expecting spies. Just because the Cofah airship had warned him to leave didn't mean they believed he would.

It took Ridge and Ahn fifteen minutes of climbing to reach the top of the hill—there was probably no need to worry about passing that physical exam next month. It was covered with the charred remains of trunks still standing after some past forest fire, and he had no trouble seeing the sky and out to the dark silhouette of the mountain, an almost perfect conical shape rising a hundred feet above the surrounding grounds.

"That looks man-made," Ahn said.

"It might be. Here, stay back against this brush, so we won't stand out. Do you see anything in the sky?" Clouds had rolled in, otherwise

the stars would be visible by now. He searched for Jaxi's balloon and spotted it a heartbeat before Ahn spoke and pointed.

"There. Observation balloon."

"Good eye. Hm, it's drifting north, but I wouldn't be surprised if it loops toward our camp." Ridge licked a finger and tested the wind. Those balloons had some directional abilities, but weren't as navigable as an airship with engines and propellers. Without the fliers, they ought to be able to hide from the observer, especially at night, although… "Maybe we'd *like* it to visit our camp."

"So we can shoot the observer?" Ahn asked.

"It's not the *observer* I want. Come on, I need to talk to Sardelle." Ridge hustled back down the hill.

. . . . .

Sardelle woke when Lieutenant Duck returned to camp. He padded in quietly, but started talking to Apex right away. "Where's the colonel?"

"Off to check on something with Raptor."

Sardelle pushed herself up. She didn't think she had been asleep that long, but full darkness had fallen. The cold earth didn't make a comfortable bed, but she had been so tired from the day of marching through snow—and using magic to clear it—that she had been asleep before her head touched the pack. She hadn't heard Ridge leave and swept out with her senses. Ah, there he was. Jogging back toward the group.

"Well, I couldn't find a way out to that mountain," Duck said. "There are pools all over the place, and they're hotter than lava to the touch. I tried to find a place where you could walk between them, but Deathmaker was right. The limestone or calcium or whatever that whitish gunk is makes up a thin layer, and there's water beneath it if you break through. I didn't see a landing pad around that mountain, but I'm figuring you have to fly out there somehow."

"You do," came Ridge's voice from the trees. "Sardelle, I'm in need of your assistance again. Could you convince that balloon to come visit us?"

"Balloon?" She yawned and crawled out from beneath her tree. She couldn't see anyone in the darkness, but sensed people's positions. Tolemek and Apex hadn't moved, or killed each other yet. That was good.

Up and to the northwest, Jaxi supplied.

Thank you. "All right. I see it."

"I'd like for it to have a hot air problem and be forced to the ground nearby, if that's doable." Ridge found her and wrapped an arm around her. "Sorry, it's probably not polite to wake you early and ask for favors without a hug." He gave her a kiss on the cheek too.

Sardelle leaned into him, happy for the warmth, then rested her cheek against his chest while she examined the hot air balloon more closely.

"How come we don't get hugs when he wants favors from us?" Duck asked.

"I think there's a rule against officers hugging other officers," Ahn said.

"There's a rule against physical relationships and displays of affection," Apex said, "but I don't believe friendly hugs are mentioned in the regulations."

"That's more than a friendly hug. I'm fairly certain he's touching her butt."

Sardelle was concentrating on the balloon and trying to ignore them, but caught herself flushing anyway.

"I am not," Ridge protested. "That's her hip. I think. It's dark out here tonight."

"Actually, it's neither," Sardelle said, deciding to go along with the teasing rather than try to protest it.

Ridge found something softer to squeeze than her hip, and she sensed his grin even if she couldn't see it. "So, I see."

"Am I correct that you don't want the balloon damaged?" she asked.

"Yes, we can patch it if need be, but that's going to be our ride out to the mountain."

"What about the pilot?" Sardelle started nudging the large balloon in their direction, forming channels of air, similar to what she had done to divert that giant owl familiar back on Galmok Mountain.

"He's not invited," Ridge said.

"What I mean is that I wouldn't care to bring him down into our midst to see him shot in front of my eyes."

"We can gag him and tie him to a tree. That ought to hold him for a few hours. That should be all we need."

"All right. I should have his craft down in a few minutes if you want to hide to ambush him." Once he got closer, Sardelle might be able to convince him to fall asleep so a violent ambush could be avoided. Then again, he had already realized his balloon was fighting him more than it should. He would be alert when she funneled out some of his hot air, forcing him to land.

"I'll take care of that," Tolemek said from his tree. He rolled to his feet, something in his hand. One of those little leather balls.

The hot air balloon came into sight over the treetops. Sardelle blew out the fire in its burner, eliciting a startled protest from the handler. She funneled air out of the balloon, too, and it descended rapidly. The wind came up, fighting her, and she struggled to keep it from getting

caught in the trees. Unfortunately, the unwieldy craft defied her, and the balloon snagged on the skeletal branches of a birch. Several snaps sounded, and she thought the balloon might fall to the ground, but enough large branches caught to support the weight of the pilot and basket.

"Sorry," Sardelle whispered, embarrassed by her lack of accuracy.

Tolemek handed his ball to Ahn. "I have a feeling you'll be better at hitting that target than I. Push that indention before you throw it."

"Got it." Ahn jogged a couple of steps and chucked the ball.

It arced up toward the tree and landed in the basket.

The pilot, alternating between trying to relight his burner and push the branches out of his basket, didn't notice it land at his feet. A minute later, all of his activity stopped.

"Nice work," Ridge said. "Now, who's going to climb up there, extract the pilot, and get the balloon down without ripping it into a thousand pieces?"

No one rushed to volunteer. The balloon was a good twenty feet up in that tree.

"It depends, sir," Duck said. "Are hugs involved?"

"If a hug from me is what it takes to motivate you, Lieutenant, I suppose in this situation, I'd consider that a fair trade-off."

"Maybe he wants a hug from Sardelle," Tolemek said.

"Er." Duck shifted his weight, the snow crunching beneath his feet.

Sardelle had a feeling that might have been an acceptable reward at one time, but now he was uncomfortable at the idea of her coming close. Ridge had been once, too, she reminded herself.

I'll do it for a nice oiling of my blade.

From whom?

Anyone with a gentle hand. That Apex is handsome when he's not being surly about pirate boy.

"Jaxi and I will handle it," Sardelle said.

You forgot to mention my oiling.

I'm not sure this group is ready to hear about your quirky needs.

They're not quirky. You like being oiled now and then too. I've seen it.

Sardelle resisted the impulse to explain the difference between massages and having one's blade protected from moisture. She was busy lifting the unconscious pilot from his basket and lowering him to the ground. Ahn stood at her shoulder, her rifle ready in case he woke up. But Tolemek's smoke had worked again, and the man remained inert.

Jaxi handled the branches and the balloon, repairing rips as she went. Sardelle relit the coal in the burner, and by the time the basket touched down, it was almost ready to take off again. Her head ached by the time she finished all of these tasks. The thirty minutes of sleep

she had gotten hadn't been as refreshing as she had hoped.

"Apex, Duck, tie the prisoner, please." Ridge walked to the basket and inspected it as much with his hands as with his eyes in the dark. "This isn't very big. We'll all be hugging and touching butts. At least it's not a long journey." He removed a rope and tied the basket to a tree. With the burner running again, the balloon was threatening to rise.

"Are we going to wait to go in?" Sardelle asked, hoping for a few hours of sleep before breaking into an ultra modern and secure Cofah laboratory.

"Yeah." Duck yawned. "I could get more excited about butt touching after a nap."

"An appealing notion," Ridge said—whether he referred to naps or butt touches wasn't entirely clear. "But this fellow might be missed. We better go in now. Maybe we'll finish our mission in thirty minutes and celebrate by finding an only mildly heated hot spring to lounge in after that."

Nobody did anything more optimistic than snorting. If things were going to be easy, the two elite troops wouldn't have been captured. Or killed.

"Grab your gear," Ridge said, his voice more sober. "It's time to go."

Chapter 12

The railing of the basket was digging into Ridge's ribcage. He wasn't sure whose elbow was in his back, but it wasn't Sardelle's. She was plastered into the corner beside him. The entire team had fit into the basket, but not comfortably, and the balloon hadn't budged, merely hovering above them with placid indifference when they removed the rope anchoring it to a tree.

"Guess we shouldn't have done all those push-ups," Duck had said. "It made our muscles grow too heavy."

"More likely all that beer you swill made your belly grow too heavy," Apex muttered.

Fortunately Sardelle, or maybe Jaxi, had done something, causing the balloon to swell until it appeared ready to burst, and the basket had floated into the air. Now they were drifting slowly toward the mountain, across the steaming pools and through air that stank of sulfur and decomposing things. The moon was poking through the clouds, a development Ridge wasn't enthused by, since anyone watching from the mountain would be able to notice the balloon—and the abnormal number of people stuffed into the basket.

Hot eddies rose up from below, creating strange air currents that tugged at the balloon. Pools and mud pots burbled as the craft passed over them, and, after hearing Tolemek's warning, Ridge knew he wouldn't want to crash. The wicker basket would make a poor shield to keep near-boiling water from seeping inside.

Without warning, a geyser erupted in front of them. They were floating more than fifty feet above the ground, but the top of the water jet reached far above them. The breeze blew the steam and water droplets toward the balloon. The basket rocked precariously as people shifted away from the spewing hot water.

"Stay steady," Ridge said, not leaving his rail. "Even out the weight." He raised a gloved hand to protect his face from the spray—it was a fine mist at this distance, but the tiny specks still burned. "Sardelle, take us around that, please." He didn't know how long the geyser would keep erupting, but the balloon was heading straight for it.

“Working on it,” she said, her voice tense.

“Thanks.” He wondered if he should apologize. Just because she had magic, didn’t mean hot air balloons would be a simple thing to navigate. But if she didn’t maneuver them away from the jet soon, they would pass through it, and find out just how much power propelled that water. Ridge’s knuckles tightened as he imagined his men being knocked from the basket, flung out like dolls, to drop fifty feet and land in those bubbling pools.

“Got any concoctions that will turn that thing off?” Ahn asked.

“No,” Tolemek said. “Had someone informed me that this was our destination, I might have brought more useful tools.”

“More likely specimen kits for collecting samples of that weird green stuff growing around the pools down there.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you have freakishly good eyesight, Ahn?” Ridge asked, though he kept glancing through his gloves to that geyser. More spray was hitting his clothing now, and the hot water bit like acid where it struck flesh. Someone jerked away from what must have been a big splash and cursed.

“Yes, they have,” Ahn said. “And I’d like to take this moment to thank you tall, looming people for protecting me from the water.”

The breeze gusted harder, and Ridge realized why Sardelle was having trouble directing them away from the geyser. She was moving them against it, trying to curve around the spraying water. If they went the way the wind wanted to carry them, in the same direction that spray was blowing, that would be an unpleasant trip.

The balloon pushed into the wind. Sardelle wiped her brow. Sweating in this cold weather? It was hard to imagine using one’s mind could be that taxing, but he appreciated that she was working that hard for them.

They drew even with the geyser and inched past it. Some of the tension ebbed from Ridge’s shoulders. So long as Sardelle’s concentration didn’t give out, so the wind couldn’t push them into it, they should be fine. Seconds after the balloon cleared the geyser, the spray died down. Within a few more seconds, it disappeared completely. Only a steaming pool below signaled that a geyser existed at all.

Duck snorted. “*Now* it goes out.”

“The timing was… precise,” Tolemek noted.

Ridge frowned over Ahn’s head at him. “Are you saying your people can control when these things shoot off?” Did that mean someone inside already knew his team was out here and sneaking in on a stolen balloon?

“I have no idea what these scientists can do. I would not think that possible without magic, but this is not my area of expertise.” Tolemek

sounded stiff, as if he resented being lumped in with these people.

Well, Ridge could soothe his ruffled feathers later. Maybe they could bond over another snowball fight.

"Even with magic, controlling the geysers would be difficult if not impossible," Sardelle said. "That's usually the case when it comes to nature."

Ridge remembered the avalanche she had dug him out of. She had later admitted she had tried and failed to divert the snow slide.

"Neither Jaxi nor I sensed magic being used," she added.

One of the mud pots belched loudly below, the stink in the air intensifying.

"Let's just get to that mountain as quickly as possible," Ridge said, then, realizing that sounded like an order, laid a hand on Sardelle's to let her know he appreciated all she was doing for them. He had to remember that neither she nor Tolemek were his troops, sworn to obey senior officers in the duty of the king. They had volunteered to come along.

Sardelle leaned against his shoulder. He didn't know if that was a sign of understanding or acceptance, or if it meant she was tired. She wasn't talking in his head at the moment.

He left his hand on hers and, as they drifted closer to the mountain, watched for lights or some sign that another person waited outside, prepared to receive signals from the balloon observer—there had been a light and mirror kit in the bottom of the basket, presumably for that purpose. But he didn't see a soul.

"Anyone out here?" he murmured to Sardelle.

"I sense people inside, but not outside."

"Still no dragons, right?" Ridge smiled, meaning it as a joke, but not entirely. If they had nearly been taken out by a geyser, he didn't want to imagine how vulnerable they would be to something that could fly and breathe fire.

"Trust me, I'll let you know if a creature believed extinct for the last thousand years plucks at my senses."

Ridge gazed toward the mountains rising to the north, the same ones they had been flying along and through since leaving the sea. In focusing on this mound among the geysers, he had neglected considering watchtowers or outposts that might overlook the area from those peaks. He thought of the old legends that always had dragons living in caves in mountains. But if Sardelle didn't sense anything, he would trust that there was nothing out there.

"We better go down soon," Duck said, "or we'll overshoot the mound and end up landing on a geyser."

"Can you magic us down there?" Ridge asked Sardelle.

She leaned past Ahn and dumped the coals into the ashbin to put

out the flames heating the air.

"Or we could do it that way," Ridge said.

"I'll try to bring us down on that little strip of gravel next to the doors," Sardelle said.

They were above the mountain now, and Ridge could see a ledge about six feet wide that circled the conical base. Or outpost. Or laboratory. He wouldn't know what to call it until he had the tour. He could also make out a couple of vents near the top, each spewing puffs of smoke. Nothing that might be a window or peephole had come into view, though. He wondered if it was too much to hope their approach wouldn't be noticed.

"Not much of a target," Tolemek said.

"It'll have to do." Sardelle had her eyes closed as the balloon dipped down.

Ridge decided not to find that alarming. Sorcerers could see with their minds, right? "If you land us on it without tipping the basket into that pool, we'll make you an honorary Wolf Squadron pilot."

Another geyser erupted, this one farther out and not as boisterous as the first. Maybe they were simply natural occurrences after all. Ridge still didn't see a road or path of any kind leading to the metal double doors, but he couldn't imagine venturing out there on foot even if there had been one.

The corner of the basket scraped against the rocky side of the miniature mountain, jostling everyone against everyone else. Sardelle was erring on the safe side, and Ridge couldn't blame her for that, but he hoped nobody on the other side of that wall would be able to hear the scrapes and bumps.

"When the colonel promised butt touching, he wasn't kidding," Duck said. "Watch out for Raptor. Her guns are poky."

"As the commanding officer, and presumably the most mature person present, I'm going to resist the urge to make a lewd comment," Ridge announced. They scraped the wall again, but they were only eight feet from the ground now. Almost safe. From the balloon flight anyway.

"Who told you that you were mature, Zirkander?" Tolemek asked.

"Perhaps I should have said advanced in years."

"Perhaps."

With another soft scrape, the balloon settled onto the ground. The corner was tilted upward, resting on the slope of the mountain, but Ridge couldn't fault Sardelle's aim, not when a bubbling and gurgling pool lay less than a foot away in the other direction.

He climbed out first, landing on packed gravel. Sardelle had said nobody was out here, but he kept a pistol in hand, nonetheless.

"How does one deflate the balloon without having it smother the

basket and fall into the water?" Tolemek wondered, eyeing the black-and-gray material above them. It hadn't yet lost the swell of its shape, but it probably would before long. "Do we need to leave someone here to make sure we can get away again once we're ready to leave?"

"There must be something inside that can take the workers away from here if need be," Ridge said. "After all, *this* thing came from somewhere in there." He didn't want to separate the team and start leaving people behind anyway.

Tolemek didn't question him further.

While the others hopped out of the basket, Ridge walked along the base of the mountain toward the alcove that held the doors. They were tall enough and wide enough that a two-seat flyer could have navigated through them, though he couldn't imagine landing and taking off without a runway, unless that was built into the mountain itself somehow.

He froze as soon as he poked his head around the corner for a better look. Clearly what Sardelle had meant was that there was nobody *living* out here. He gulped as he stared at two bodies hanging on hooks on either side of the closed doors.

Though Ridge wasn't certain he wanted to see better, he had to know who the people were—who they had been. He dug into his utility pouch for his small tin of matches. He lit one, the flame flaring and reflecting off heavy rivets on the steel door. It also illuminated the bodies.

On both of them, the skin had been flayed—no burned—off, leaving the facial features unrecognizable, but the shredded remains of gray-and-blue Iskandian army uniforms were all too familiar. Much of the hair had been removed—burned or melted away, but from the sizes and shapes, one clearly feminine, Ridge was fairly certain he was looking at the bodies of Captains Nowon and Kaika. He let the match fall to the ground and dropped his chin to his fist, guilt and regret gnawing at him. If he hadn't left that posturing colonel behind, was it possible the mission would have gone more smoothly? That the elite troops team might still be alive?

"Oh hells," Duck whispered, stopping beside Ridge. The others soon gathered in front of the doors too.

Tolemek shook his head slowly. Sardelle closed her eyes and looked away. It was a disturbing image. Ridge was glad the sulfurous scent all around them overrode the butcher-house smell that had to be lingering around the bodies.

"Should we cut them down, sir?" Ahn asked.

"If we can get them on the way out, we will." Ridge would like to give the officers burials somewhere, but the sooner they finished what they had come for, the sooner they might escape with their own lives

intact. He didn't want to see the rest of his team suffer this fate.

Ridge took a breath and walked up to the double doors. There wasn't a handle, latch, or even a keyhole. He looked back at Sardelle.

"Tolemek has a knack for opening doors or making them where they don't exist." She sounded weary, like she would prefer to hand this task off to another.

"Yes, he does," Ahn said.

If there was an alternative, Ridge would gladly save Sardelle's powers for when they truly needed them. "Tolemek?"

"It will take a couple of minutes." Tolemek stepped forward, and the satchel he always carried clanked as he dug into it.

Ridge tried pushing and pulling on the doors while he waited. He didn't expect them to budge—and they didn't—but one had to try. In the darkness, he wasn't positive what Tolemek was doing, but he seemed to be drawing a circle on one of the doors. After a moment, he stepped back.

Ridge shifted his weight from foot to foot, resisting the urge to demand what was supposed to be happening. Eventually, Tolemek planted a boot on the center of the circle and shoved. To Ridge's surprise, the movement dislodged the metal. With a resounding clang that made Ridge wince, the circle fell through, landing on a stone floor on the other side. Light spilled out from within. Ridge dropped to his knee to the side of the hole, pistol in hand, and leaned in, prepared for a firefight if legions of guards were descending on the door.

But the chamber inside, a cavernous space with ceilings so high he couldn't see them from the doorway, was silent. Black marble tiles stretched out in all directions. There were doors to what might have been a lift at the far end of the space. He glimpsed alcoves and recessed doors in the side walls, too, though they were also a long walk from his observing point. Everything was. This chamber looked to take up most of the ground floor of the mountain base. Maybe it *was* a hangar. Many of the tiles were chipped or cracked, and he spotted a couple of old oil stains.

The only sign of humanity was a guard in a crimson Cofah uniform lying on the floor a couple feet from the big metal circle. Ridge's first thought was that he had been crushed by the massive falling disk, but no part of his body was trapped beneath it.

"Looks clear, sir," Ahn whispered. She had knelt on the other side of the hole from him, her rifle at the ready.

Without taking his eyes from the room, Ridge stepped through the hole. The large chamber was lit from above, dozens of bulb-shaped paper lamps hanging suspended from the ceiling at all different heights. Some were even moving about. Strange. Ah, but no, they

weren't hanging at all but floating. The candles or whatever fuel was burning must be heating the air within the lampshade, like the burner had heated the hot air balloon outside.

Interesting, but not the ultra modern technology they had been sent here to learn about. Ridge shifted to the side, so the others could enter, and so he could check the guard. It was one thing seeing dead enemies of the Cofah hung up as a warning in front of their secret laboratory, but one didn't expect the guards to be dead too.

The man's neck had been slit. No need to check the pulse, but Ridge touched his skin anyway, trying to get a gauge for when this had happened—and who might have done it. If his people had both died, did this mean they had some other ally in here? Or maybe the Cofah had some other enemy worried about secret bases and dragon blood. The guard's skin was faintly warm.

"This didn't happen long ago," Ridge said, then chastised himself for stating the obvious. Of course, it had to have happened after the balloon observer left, or the man wouldn't have gone out on his normal rounds. Then again, Ridge couldn't prove the balloon man had left through these doors. He couldn't imagine where else such a craft might be launched, but there weren't any other baskets lined up along the walls.

By now, the rest of the squadron had entered the chamber, and everyone was looking at him. That didn't normally faze him—he was in charge, after all—but he had no idea where they should start searching. He turned three hundred and sixty degrees, seeking inspiration from the chamber. He halted to stare at notable decorations, ones he hadn't registered on his first inspection because they were so big as to seem like part of the architecture.

"Uhm?" Ridge muttered, stepping back and nearly tripping over his heels as he craned his neck to see into the shadows above the lanterns.

What he had mistaken for columns were the legs of enormous blocky statues. With patchwork metal bodies of bronze, steel, and more alloys Ridge couldn't identify, they looked like some child's project composed from junkyard scraps, except on an enormous scale. They were humanoid with rectangular torsos and square heads that sat flush against the broad flat shoulders, with nothing resembling a neck. They had simple faces, rectangular holes for mouths, circular holes for noses, and vertical rectangles for eyes, the latter appearing closed, metal lids drawn down in sleep.

"I believe those represent the Tangula Tarath from Cofah mythology," Apex noted. "The ambulatory statues protected the gods' sky palaces from dragons, back when humans were dwelling in caves and hunting mammoths with stone-tipped spears."

"Whatever they are, I really hope they don't come to life," Duck

said.

Ridge almost snorted. Come to life. How could they? But he caught himself before he expelled that breath. If unmanned aircraft could be powered and directed by dragon blood, what if giant statues could be too?

"Let's get moving before they decide to," Ridge said. "Sardelle, any idea of where the stash of blood might be?"

Her eyes stared off into the distance. He was starting to recognize that expression as the one she wore when she was discussing things with her sword. With Jaxi, he amended. Somehow it sounded less odd to his mundane little mind to think of Jaxi as a person rather than a pointy stick.

Good for your mind. I'm less likely to harass people who use my name.

Before Ridge could reply, or decide if he should flush with embarrassment, Sardelle was answering his question.

"The heaviest concentration is up there." She pointed toward the ceiling.

"Let's try that way then." Ridge pointed toward the far wall where sliding metal doors waited—all of the other exits from the chamber were single doors. "It looks like a lift."

Nobody objected to his assessment. Either they thought he had a clue, or they didn't have any better ideas. Inspiring.

He, Ahn, Duck, and Apex walked on either side of the group, their rifles cradled in their arms and pointed toward the perimeter, ready to shoot if any guards trotted out of those doors. Ahn looked alert and unintimidated, her calm gaze roaming about, taking in everything as they advanced. Duck and Apex didn't look quite as professional. Their boots clomped a little loudly, and their shoulders were tense, as were the fingers on the triggers. Ridge tried not to think about how Kaika and Nowon, true professionals when it came to sneaking into places, had been discovered. He had Sardelle and Tolemek. That ought to give Ridge an advantage they hadn't had, no matter how skilled they had been at stealth, attack, and evasion. Still, the lack of columns or any sort of features that could be used for cover in a firefight made him nervous as they traveled across the very large, very open chamber.

The group had walked halfway to the lift when a soft clink-clank-clink-clank sound came from behind them. It reminded Ridge of the drawbridge being raised back in the king's castle. Or of a clockwork machine being wound up. He and his pilots spun in the direction of the noise, their rifles ready. Sardelle and Tolemek faced in that direction, too, though they didn't reach for weapons, as if they knew that whatever they might face wouldn't be harmed by mere bullets.

Nothing back there was moving, save for the floating lamps that

drifted lazily on currents of air, but the mechanical noises continued. Then Ridge spotted something that had changed: the eyes on the statues were open. And they were glowing red.

"You still not sensing any magic, Sardelle?" Ridge pointed to the eyes.

"Not magic, in the traditional sense, but there is dragon blood in those statues."

"You didn't think that was important to mention before?" He regretted the sarcasm immediately, but there was no time for apologies. "Back up, everyone. Keep heading to the lift. Let's see if we can get out of here before we get a demonstration of what those things can do."

"Yes, sir."

He hardly needed to give the order—no one was charging down the room to engage those things. Half of the team turned and ran for the lift doors. Ridge backed away more slowly, watching those statues. What had Apex said? Ambulatory? They looked too top-heavy to move, but he wasn't willing to make a bet against that.

The tone of the clink-clanks shifted, as if smaller gears were moving than had been before, and the left arms on both of the statues began to rise. The next step before the metal contraptions started walking?

"The doors are locked again," Duck said, reaching the lift first.

"Tolemek?" Ridge prompted.

"If it is indeed a lift, burning through the doors may render it inoperable."

"Sardelle?"

The arms of the statues had risen to roughly forty-five degree angles and stopped. Ridge didn't like the way they seemed to be pointing at his team. If something crazy happened, they could still escape through the front doors, but they would have to run a hundred meters to reach them.

"It's a lift system, yes," Sardelle said. "I can sense that there's a vertical shaft behind the doors. There's not a cage or cabin or anything on the other side, though. It might be at the top."

Ridge had been prompting her to open the doors, but that information was valuable too. "Then burning a hole shouldn't make a difference, eh? While Tolemek does that, someone see if there are any levers around to call the lift down to our level. I'm going to be—"

Without warning, a *thik-thunk* came from the other side of the room, and something flew from the tip of one of those arms. Ridge jumped to the side, though it was more luck than skill that kept him from being skewered. Something clacked into the marble floor beside him with enough force to crack the tile and leave a hole. It ricocheted

off, landing with a ping somewhere else in the room.

"—dodging for my life," he finished with a grimace.

Ridge looked around, but he had already studied the room with defenses in mind, and he knew there was no place to hide, no cover to be taken. The firing noise came again, and Ridge dodged to the side again, as he might in a firefight in the sky, but he was just guessing that he was a target.

This time, the projectile thudded into something behind him. He glanced back, his heart jumping into his throat. If it had hit Sardelle or one of his men…

But the weapon was stuck in the lift door—it had ripped into the outer metal layer and was sticking out, still quivering. A knife? No, it had several points. A large version of a Cofah throwing star, but it was more like a saw blade at this size.

"Hurry, hurry," Duck whispered.

"I'm going to second that." Ridge raised his rifle to aim at the head of one of the statues, but he was reluctant to shoot and make noise. The statues weren't *that* loud by themselves, but someone was bound to hear gunfire and wake up to check on intruders.

Sardelle stepped up beside Ridge, her sword out now. Out and glowing.

"Jaxi and I will protect the group from fire," she said.

The *thik-thunk* came again. Despite her words, Ridge's instincts were to throw himself to the ground to make a smaller target.

The throwing star hurtled out of the shadows toward them, but burst into fire ten feet away. Ridge swallowed. That had been an accurate throw. It might have cleaved one of them in half.

"How're those doors coming, Tolemek?" Ridge asked, wishing he didn't feel so useless. He fingered the trigger of his rifle. Would a bullet even do anything against a metal statue? Maybe if one shot at the holes from which the stars were being ejected. From this far across the chamber, that would be a job for Ahn.

"I've applied the dissolving goo."

"It's smoking," Duck added helpfully.

"No sign of a lever," Apex added, less helpfully.

Ridge started to ask Sardelle if she could call the lift down from whatever level it was on, but the statues shot again. She was busy. He hated relying on her for everything anyway. He dropped his rucksack and pulled out a coil of rope. Maybe there would be something inside the shaft they could anchor it to so they could climb up to the next level, or at least out of reach of the statues.

A creak and a groan came on the heels of the next round of projectiles. The arms weren't moving this time; it was the legs. A shudder ran through the floor with the statues' first ponderous steps.

“I appreciate you and Jaxi keeping us from being shot,” Ridge said. “Are you going to be able to keep us from being crushed by ten tons of metal too?”

The doubtful expression on her face said a lot. Nothing he wanted to hear.

“Ahn and anyone else who’s not helping with the doors, come up here,” Ridge said, raising his rifle again. “Stealth probably became useless as soon as we knocked open their front door. Time to see if we can find a vulnerable spot on those statues.”

“You’ll have to stand over there to do so.” Sardelle pointed to the side. “I have a barrier up in front of the doors and the group, and your bullets would be bounced back at us.”

“Good to know before we start shooting.” Ridge and Ahn stepped to the spot where she had indicated, and she gave him a nod.

“I assume we’re in danger here too?” Ahn asked.

“I’ll keep my eye on you, but you might want to lunge back over here before they shoot each round.”

“Understood.” Ridge fired his first shot, aiming at one of the red eyes. Those things were eerie.

But the statues were still a hundred meters away, their heads obscured by the shadows above the lamps. His bullet clanged into the nose hole instead. A few clangs sounded—the shell bouncing around inside its head? Well, maybe that would do some damage too.

Ahn must have guessed his original target, for she aimed in the same direction. Her bullet took the statue in the right eye. The red glow blinked a couple of times, but then returned to a steady crimson light.

“Guess the eyes aren’t the most vulnerable part of a statue.” Ridge thought about firing at the monster’s crotch, more out of spite than because he believed that would be a vulnerable spot, but that seemed a touch immature. Besides, he was busy jumping back into Sardelle’s sphere of protection, for the statues were firing again. Firing and walking. As slow and ponderous as those steps were, the monsters were drawing ever closer.

A soft metal clang sounded behind him.

“I’ve made a hole,” Tolemek said.

“Duck, take my spot,” Ridge said and joined Tolemek at the lift door, bringing his coil of rope. It was probably foolish to think there would be anything up there he could hook it on, but it was worth a look. He had a collapsible grappling hook in his pack too.

“We’re on the ground floor,” Tolemek said, pulling his head out of the still smoking hole. Amazingly, his shaggy ropes of hair didn’t catch fire in the process. “I can’t tell how high up the shaft goes. It’s dark. There’s not a ladder or anything on the wall to climb; I could tell

that much."

"I don't think lighting lift shafts is a priority in many places." Ridge ignored the shots firing behind him, even though the blazes that occurred when Sardelle stopped a throwing star were bright and spectacular, and eyeballed some of the nearest floating lanterns. Some of them weren't that high up there. He made a quick lasso with the rope and gave himself room to throw. "Sardelle is busy at the moment, but she floated that Cofah observer out of the balloon. Maybe she can float us up too. Or call down the lift." That would probably be less taxing for her.

"Except that we might not be able to spare her out there." Tolemek nodded his head. "Those statues are going to be here soon. We might have to abandon this and run back to the front door."

Ridge set his jaw. Retreating was better than dying, but if they ran out, they might not get another opportunity to slip in. He was surprised nobody had come down to check on them as it was. Or maybe the Cofah knew they had guests but trusted their statues to handle it.

Ridge caught the lamp he was aiming for, though it took a delicate touch to guide it down to them. The thin paper lanterns were lightweight. He handed it to Tolemek. "Add some more oil and see if you can get it hot enough to float up the shaft. I'll try to get another one."

"Your aim is surprisingly good. Did you rope cattle before becoming a pilot?"

Ridge squinted at him, not sure if that was a compliment or the setup for a joke where he was the butt. "There's a pub in town where you can rope mechanical rabbits that run back and forth on a clockwork track. If you get five in a row, you get a free beer. Naturally, I'm well-practiced."

He tossed his lasso again and brought down another light. The floor was shivering more than ever now as the statues closed the distance. Another twenty steps and they would be upon the group. Sardelle, Duck, and Ahn would have to back up soon. If Ridge thought simply climbing through the hole Tolemek had made would save them, he would order it, but what happened if someone above chose that moment to send the lift down? And what happened if the statues could simply smash through the door with those colossal legs?

Ridge handed the second lantern to Tolemek, then stuck his head through. The first was already inside, lighting the shaft as it rose. The smooth walls didn't offer any hooks, nor were there more doors for more than fifty feet—of course, with the high ceiling of this chamber there wouldn't be. Climbing up there would be impossible, and his rope wouldn't reach anything useful. He *did* see the bottom of what

appeared to be a lift cage, though.

"Sardelle, want to see if you can bring this down?" Ridge asked, leaning out and grabbing his rifle again. The statues were so close that they towered over the group now, their heads nearly brushing the ceiling, rice paper lamps bouncing off their chests. "Ahn and I will try to distract the statues."

"We will?" Ahn asked.

"Just like dodging cannonballs in your flier."

Ridge took a step toward her, but a quake ran through the floor. At first, he assumed it was just another reverberation caused by the colossal statues' steps, but the seam in the tiles under his feet parted, then dropped open.

Ridge twisted and tried to grab at the lift doors, but he was too far away. The space that opened up in the tiles was too large. It was a door of some kind, a trap door. And he had been standing in the wrong spot. He fell into darkness and could do nothing except cry out Sardelle's name as he plummeted. He wasn't sure if it was a call for help or a protest that they were being parted, but it was the last thing he got out before the darkness consumed him.

Chapter 13

"Ridge!" Sardelle cried, her concentration lapsing. She hadn't been looking toward the lift when the trapdoor opened, and she hadn't seen the men fall, but Ridge, Apex, and Tolemek were gone, swallowed by a black pit.

"Sardelle," Ahn snapped. "Watch the—"

Sardelle was yanked to the side. One of the huge throwing stars screamed past her ear, slamming into the floor and chipping marble.

"Sorry, yes, thanks," she blurted, yanking back her focus, forcing herself to wait until they were out of danger to worry about Ridge. Even if she wanted to scream and jump into that hole after him. Which might not be a bad idea if it meant escaping from these behemoths. *Figure out how to melt whatever's making them move and shoot yet, Jaxi?*

Working on it. Machines aren't my forte, you know. Jaxi sounded tense and defensive, a rarity for her. That did nothing to soothe Sardelle's nerves as she reestablished the barrier that would protect the team from the projectiles. Not "the team." Just her, Ahn, and Duck.

Clang!

The trapdoor had reset itself. The hole was gone. *Ridge* was gone.

Sardelle struggled to keep the bleakness from overwhelming her, stealing her already flagging energy. "Duck, over here. You're not within my sphere of protection."

"We should retreat to the front door," Duck said, running over to join Sardelle and Ahn. "Think about how to destroy them from out there."

"Assuming they don't follow," Ahn said. "Those doors are big. Can the statues bend over? We might be better ducking into the elevator shaft. Sardelle, you floated that Cofah observer out of the tree. Can you float us up to another floor?"

After defending them from the statues, Sardelle didn't feel up to floating a pencil onto a table. "Maybe. But not while I'm protecting us from them. Give me a second. Jaxi is trying to figure out what operates them so we can melt it. She already tried to destroy the

dragon blood inside, but it's not easy to burn, vaporize, or otherwise demolish. The metal hull is so thick that we weren't able to melt it, either."

I could eventually, Jaxi put in. *With a sustained burn. But they're not giving us much time.*

Indeed—as Jaxi was speaking, Sardelle had to jump to the side to avoid a giant stomping foot. The metal monstrosities had long since reached the lift and were doing their best to crush her and the others. Her defensive barrier might be able to stop bullets, but she wasn't ready to try standing beneath a ten-ton foot to see if the statue would bounce off. Her people hadn't been able to keep a mountain from crushing them, after all; there was a limit to what sorcery could accomplish. She had already tried without success to knock the statues over.

"Is it my imagination," Duck asked, "or is it trying to herd us toward the lift—toward that trapdoor in the floor?"

"It's herding us," Sardelle said.

"Any chance that wouldn't be a death sentence? Can you tell if the colonel is still alive?" Duck had a desperate look in his eyes. He probably had no idea what a sorceress could do and was simply hoping she had answers.

"I…" Sardelle stretched out with her senses, trying to locate Ridge. "No," she said, a feeling of bewilderment coming over her. Had he fallen so far and so fast that he was already out of her range? *Jaxi? Do you know what happened to Ridge?*

No, and I'm busy with your other assignment, right now.

But can you at least check? Do you sense him out there at all?

Jaxi was silent. Sardelle and the others danced away from more stomping feet. Ahn stepped out from behind the barrier and fired a couple more rounds at the statues. Her aim was accurate, but none of the bullets caused the machine to falter or slow in any way.

"You can't vaporize the blood, right?" Ahn asked. "But couldn't you vaporize the glass?"

"What?" Sardelle asked, barely hearing her, distressed by her inability to feel Ridge out there. *Jaxi? Are you busy, or…?*

I don't sense him, Sardelle. Or the others. I'm sorry.

Because they've fallen out of range? She couldn't see how that could happen. Jaxi could sense twenty or thirty miles, at least.

I don't think so.

The only other explanation was that they were dead. No, Sardelle couldn't accept that.

"If the blood is on some controller board, the way it was in those unmanned fliers, couldn't you just burn the board? Or the glass bubble holding it on there?" Ahn asked.

Oh. Maybe… yes, let me try.

Sardelle, still numb with the implication of Jaxi's previous words, didn't respond. She barely managed to keep her shield up when another throwing star spun down at them. How much ammunition could these stupid machines have, anyway? A surge of rage filled her, and she longed to run over and chop at one of those lumbering legs, as if it were some tree she could hew down.

She paused at the thought. Maybe it *was* something Jaxi could cut through. Sardelle had been too distracted by protecting the group to try—and maybe intimidated by the size too—but a soulblade could cut through things a mundane sword couldn't.

Gripping the weapon in both hands, she was about to lunge forward when the leg she was glowering at stopped moving. Sardelle tilted her head back as far as she could, trying to see the glowing eyes, but the statue towered so near that she couldn't see past its blocky torso. It had definitely stopped moving, though. Not just the leg, but the rest of the body as well. The arms drooped, and nothing new was fired from them.

The second statue, a dozen meters to the side, had stopped as well.

Someone should have suggested that earlier, Jaxi thought, her voice small, barely a presence in Sardelle's mind. *Like when they first started moving. It could have saved… much.*

Sorry. I should have thought of that myself. "Good thinking, Ahn," she made herself say, though it felt like there was a weight sitting on her chest. Talking hurt. So did everything.

I should have too. I don't… Sardelle, this isn't my world anymore. These mechanical things, I don't… I don't understand them. I don't know what to do when they're a threat.

It was the most uncertainty and remorse Sardelle could remember sensing in Jaxi's words in a long time. Maybe ever.

I know. I don't blame you. Sardelle wasn't sure she could say the same thing for herself. Ridge couldn't truly be gone, could he? That quickly? That meaninglessly?

"Are they down there somewhere?" Ahn waved at the trapdoor. "Should we go after them? Sardelle, can you tell? Are they… all right?"

"I can't sense them at all. It's possible the fall—that they… didn't make it."

Ahn's mouth formed a silent, "Oh."

Duck lowered his rifle, apparently realizing the statues were no longer a threat. He stared at the trapdoor for a long moment, then focused on Ahn. "Raptor, you've got two months' seniority on me, on account of your prior service before entering officer training school."

Sardelle looked back and forth between Duck and Ahn for a

moment before she realized what was happening. He was ceding command of the mission to her. Something about that made Ridge's death seem real, far more real than Sardelle was yet ready to accept.

Ahn was as practical as anyone Sardelle knew, and she almost expected the young lieutenant to snap right into leadership mode, but she stared at the floor in front of the lift instead, blinking rapidly, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. She had lost Tolemek and her commander, the man who had been a big brother to her for a lot longer than Sardelle had known him. Sardelle didn't know if it would be appreciated, but she walked over and gave Ahn a hug. Maybe she just wanted one herself.

Ahn didn't push away, but she didn't return the hug, either. It was understandable. After a moment, Sardelle stepped back. She probably would have dropped into a weepy pile at any greater sharing of solace anyway. Mourning would have to wait.

"What are your orders?" Duck prompted after a moment of silence. "Go out or try to find a way up?" He pointed at the lift, the hole in the side of the door staring into dark emptiness.

"Up," Ahn whispered, then lifted her chin, her eyes hard. "Up," she repeated more loudly. "We're not crawling out of here with nothing. Not after…" She shook her head and repeated, "Up. Sardelle, can you get us over the trapdoor and up the lift?"

Sardelle tried to keep a calm facade in the face of the young expectant gazes that turned in her direction. It might be a relief that she didn't have to hide her secrets now, but at some point, she would have to explain the limitations of magic, or rather the limitations of the user. The mental strain it put on a person might be minimal after a good night's rest and with no other stresses on one's life, but now… She couldn't keep herself from glancing at that trap door.

I see how it's triggered. I can keep it from falling when you walk on it. Can you help me figure out the workings of the lift? That would be easier than trying to levitate three people up a shaft. And you've got the problem of potentially running into the bottom of the lift. Or having someone order it down while you're in *the shaft.*

That thought filled Sardelle's mind with a horrifying image.

"Give me a moment, please," Sardelle said. "It's more feasible to bring the lift down." She hoped.

All right, let's try this, Jaxi. It should be relatively simple, simpler than the statue machinery.

So you say. You haven't seen the big steam machine in the room at the top of the shaft.

Sardelle closed her eyes and let her mind's eye travel up the dark vertical passage waiting behind the hole Tolemek had made. There were four levels above this one. The lift cubicle itself was all the way

at the top of the shaft, but she got a sense for the cable system that could raise and lower it. It didn't appear to be automated—on levels other than this one, there were levers to pull that presumably called the lift down. There were also levers inside the cubicle itself. The machine room Jaxi had mentioned lay above the shaft, but the cables were fed through holes in the floor. It looked complicated, but they should just need to pull the right lever, right? Whichever one that was. This floor must not be used often. Maybe there was another way to access the mountain, and only intruders with lock picks or corrosive goo were invited through the main doors.

There's a room full of hot air balloons at the very top. I think the peak of the mountain must open up.

That could explain why the outside gravel strip had been so narrow. It had never been meant for landing.

While Sardelle was thoughtfully studying the levers with her mind and trying to trace the various cables up to the machine room, Jaxi started pushing and pulling things randomly.

What are you doing?

The cable system engaged, and the lift started descending.

That. Jaxi sounded smug. Then the lift stopped on a floor well above theirs. *Huh.* Jaxi pulled another lever.

A few clanks drifted out of the shaft from above. The lieutenants watched the doors, waiting expectantly. Sardelle was glad they couldn't *see* the lift going up and down the way she could. There might have been numbers or instructions beside the various levers, but Sardelle couldn't sense things in that great of detail. Jaxi might have been able to—she could allegedly read books in a library while buried under a mountain hundreds of meters below—but she wasn't having much luck with the system.

There aren't any labels; I would have noticed that. You probably get a tour when you're hired. Here, I think it's coming down now.

Sardelle might have laughed at the randomness of their infiltration strategy—and her lack of qualifications for leading a group of people through this technological miasma—but her soul lacked the capacity for humor at the moment. She felt bleakness rather than triumph when the lift finally stopped on their level.

"Is it safe to cross now?" Ahn pointed at the trapdoor, the outline disguised by the cracks between the tiles.

I think I've jammed the mechanism that made the floor drop away, but double-check, please.

Had I realized machines could make you polite, I would have locked you in an engineer's lab centuries ago. Sardelle found the gears and pulley system built into the floor beside the trap door. If she hadn't been busy defending against giant statues, she might have noticed all

that down there earlier. Or perhaps not. She wouldn't have known to look for such things. She vowed to check around every doorway, stair landing, and cupboard for the rest of the time they were in the mountain.

"It's safe." Sardelle led the way across the treacherous patch of floor and ducked through the hole Tolemek had made. A lantern burned inside the lift cubicle, which was open on both sides. Nothing but a rock wall was behind them, but she was getting a sense of the installation layout now and knew that some passages opened up in that direction higher up. She supposed they wouldn't find a map lying around anywhere.

There are some people gathering up on the floor we want to go to, Jaxi said as soon as everyone was inside.

Maybe we should go to a different floor then.

The highest concentration of dragon blood is up there. In a small storage room, I think.

Sardelle imagined a dragon slumbering in a broom closet with a lot of syringe holes punctured in its hide.

I'd know if there were a dragon here. It would be sentient and have a soul I could sense. Also it wouldn't fit in a closet.

I know. I was just… never mind. How many people are up there?

About six right now. They're gathering for something, preparing themselves.

For us?

Maybe. Let me see if I can direct the lift to the right floor.

"There are going to be people waiting for us when we step out," Sardelle said.

"Good." Ahn had already reloaded her rifle, but she checked it again.

Duck nodded once, his face grim.

With a clank and a shiver, the lift started rising.

"How many people?" Ahn asked.

"At least six."

"I'll step out and go left. Duck, you go right. Sardelle, can you and your sword glow and attract their attention?"

"Yes." *Keep us alive, Jaxi. We're the bait.*

Getting shot at doesn't bother me.

Maybe I'll just throw you into the room and let you *glow then.*

We're almost there.

Are they expecting us?

They're facing the door, wondering who it is. They were about to come down to make sure the statues had finished us off.

"Be ready," Sardelle murmured as the lift came to a stop.

The doors didn't open. Sardelle sighed. Would they have to wait for

the guards to let them in?

Ahn pushed a button on the side of the door. The doors slid open.

People in this century are so smart.

Sardelle was too busy creating a shield to answer. She would have to be careful to cover Ahn and Duck as they stepped out but not block them from firing. If one of their bullets bounced back and struck her in the chest… Jaxi wasn't the healer she was, so that could be a death sentence.

They stepped out, not into an open room or corridor, but into a haze of brown smoke that stung her eyes and throat and limited visibility to a couple of feet. She kept the shield up, and it was a good thing: guns fired and bullets flew out of the smoke.

I guess they figured out who was coming. Jaxi added a silver flare to Sardelle's shield, making the boundaries visible to anyone close enough to see through the smoke. At first, Sardelle didn't know why—it would make her shield visible to their enemies too—but when Duck and Ahn started shooting around the edge while keeping their bodies protected, she understood.

Slowly, she walked forward, in the direction the barrage of bullets was coming from. The six people were split into two groups, kneeling and standing behind columns to shoot. Ahn and Duck wouldn't be able to see them through the smoke, and Sardelle groped for a way to explain where their enemies were exactly. She could have attacked them, but not without dropping the shield. The acrid smoke was already distracting enough that she struggled to maintain her concentration. It bit at the insides of her nostrils and tears streamed down her eyes.

A cry of pain came from ahead. Someone's bullet striking a Cofah, even through the smoke.

Sardelle kept walking and was halfway to the closest column when Ahn dove to the side, rolling across the floor and disappearing into the smoke. Though surprised, Sardelle kept going. She wiped her eyes, and the outline of one of the thick columns came into view.

Four rapid shots came from the wall to her left. Even though Ahn had gone in that direction, Sardelle's first thought was that the Cofah had crept around them and were firing from the side, where her shield wasn't up to protect them. But no, she sensed the Cofah ahead still, and, yes, that was Ahn over there. Shouts and grunts of pain signaled the bullets finding flesh. Two of the Cofah behind the near column crumpled to the floor; the third turned and ran, clutching at his thigh.

Sardelle shifted toward the other column. Bullets were still pinging off her shield, but the Cofah had figured out the intruders had split up, and they were firing at Ahn now too. Since Sardelle couldn't extend her shield to protect her, not without blocking her ability to fire, she

rushed the column instead. No need to walk when one could run.

Close your eyes, Jaxi warned.

Sardelle did so, and a flash of light like a sun exploding erupted against her eyelids. The Cofah stumbled back, and the smoke vanished. Taking advantage of their blindness, Sardelle charged in, letting her shield drop and wielding Jaxi like the sword she was. The men knew she was coming and flung out their rifles, swinging them like clubs and trying to keep her at bay, but Jaxi cut through them faster than Tolemek's goo cut through metal doors. She took one man in the chest at the same time as someone's bullet slammed into the second's forehead. Both guards dropped to the floor. Duck leaped into the fray and caught the third one from behind, pressing a knife to his throat. Ahn charged toward a corridor at the back of the room, following a blood trail.

"Be careful," Sardelle called and almost ran after her, fearing traps under every floor tile.

But Duck's prisoner was struggling, despite the blade at his throat. He opened his hand, dropping something, and more of the smoke spewed into the air. It must have surprised Duck, because the man was able to get his arms up and push the dagger away. He spun toward Duck, a blade of his own in his hand. Duck backed away, but clipped his shoulder against the column. The guard lunged. Sardelle lifted a hand, intending to throw a shield between the two men. But Jaxi attacked first, flaring, and blasted the Cofah with a stream of fire.

Duck stumbled away from the heat, but he wasn't injured. Jaxi flared again, burning away the smoke.

I think he wanted to keep that man alive for questioning, Sardelle noted.

You don't think he would have found that difficult if he himself were dead?

Duck stared at Sardelle and the soulblade, his eyes round. Jaxi's glow had faded but not left entirely, and Duck's expression was more one of terror than gratitude.

"We better catch up with Ahn," Sardelle said. "She went—"

A shot fired from the direction in which she had run.

Duck nodded. "Got it."

The clank of machinery came from the direction of the lift. Sardelle stepped out from behind the column to look as a huge metal wall slammed down with a thunderous boom. She gaped. It was more than a door sliding closed. The thick slab had fallen out of a gap in the ceiling to completely cover the lift and the entire length of the wall on either side.

Rifle in hand, Duck jumped over the charred Cofah and ran for the corridor Ahn had gone down. Maybe she hadn't been the one to fire

that shot; maybe the Cofah had escaped and activated this new trap.

Duck was about to turn into the corridor when a grim-faced Ahn strode out of it.

He skidded to a stop. “Are you all right? Did you get the Cofah?”

“Yes, but he smacked some lever in a little room before I caught up with him.” Ahn flung a disgusted hand toward the metal wall blocking the lift. “I assume that’s what he activated.”

“We didn’t want to leave yet anyway, right?” Duck said.

The way Ahn’s lips thinned wasn’t a smile. “Let’s find that blood.”

She led the way down the corridor, with Sardelle and Duck following. Doors lined the route on either side, some open and some closed. Small, dark rooms lay behind them, all with glass walls on the far side. They came to one with lanterns lit inside.

“Wait.” Sardelle wanted to see what was behind the glass. She stepped inside of what turned out to be an observation room overlooking a lab on a lower floor. There weren’t any people in it, but the workbenches piled with tools and machinery looked like they had been used recently.

She ticked the glass with a nail, wondering if they might break it and escape that way when they were ready to go. It sounded thick.

More than six inches. Given enough time, I might be able to melt through it, but there’s something in there.

What?

As if in response to the question, something moved in the shadows of a far corner. Sardelle was about to stretch out her senses to get a feel for it, but it moved first. It *flew*.

A construct similar in size to the unmanned flier floated up to the observation window. Instead of having a propeller on the nose, like the other one, this craft had a propeller circling above it, allowing it to hover in place. Small rockets were mounted beneath its compact frame.

Those look like the ones that stalked Ridge’s flier, then exploded, Jaxi observed.

Maybe we’ll keep looking for another way out.

Maybe a good idea.

By the time she returned to the corridor, Duck and Ahn had reached the end and were standing in front of another big metal door. It took up the whole back wall and appeared as sturdy as the slab that had fallen to block the lift. Before Sardelle got close, she could feel energy humming from it. No, *through* it.

“That’s our spot,” she said.

“How can you tell?” Duck asked.

“I just can.” Sardelle was surprised they couldn’t feel any of the power. It crackled in the air around them like electricity.

“Any ideas on how to get in?” Ahn touched three shallow divots on one side of the door. They were the only markings. “Does a key go here, or…?”

“I’ll try to figure it out.” Sardelle stepped closer and touched the cool, smooth metal. It was hard not to jerk her hand back. The power swarmed over her skin like fire ants, ants that bit and nipped at her fingers.

Good luck. I’ve already looked at the locking mechanism. It’s a lot more complicated than what operated the trapdoor, and if I melt it, I think we’ll just permanently lock ourselves out.

Maybe the sides of the room—vault?—are less secure and we can cut our way in from another direction.

It’s all metal. They like metal here. As heavy as this mountain must be, I’m surprised the whole thing doesn’t sink into the hot springs out there.

The facility did have a lot of metal. The floors and walls weren’t made of it, thankfully, or the iron in the steel would have interfered with Sardelle’s ability to sense their surroundings. Her thoughts hiccupped. Was that why she couldn’t sense Ridge and the others? Maybe they hadn’t fallen to their deaths, after all. Maybe they were simply buried under too much metal for her to sift through.

She looked at Ahn, opening her mouth.

The walls and floors aren’t metal, Jaxi pointed out. *You were just acknowledging that.*

Sardelle closed her mouth. She would wait to say anything to Ahn until she had more proof, but maybe if they could find a map, she could see what was down below the entrance chamber. Once they had the blood, they could check on Ridge and the others. She wouldn’t leave them unless she knew without a doubt that they were gone.

We haven’t even figured out how to get the blood or get off this floor yet.

Then we have a project.

Better hurry it along. There’s a lot of activity now in the rest of the compound. It’s a foregone conclusion that the rest of the guards know where we are. I doubt they’re going to let us sit here and pry our way into their vault unopposed.

Your cheerful optimism is always a pleasure to be around.

“Got something?” Ahn asked.

“Just thinking,” Sardelle said. “While I’m working on the door, you two might want to consider how to defend us if guards show up.”

“You think that’s likely with the lift blocked?” Duck asked.

“If there are other ways in, they’ll know about them.”

“We’ll be ready.” Ahn hefted her rifle.

Sardelle faced the vault door and shut out the rest of the world to focus on the locking mechanism. She tried not to find the complex

system daunting, but failed. As Jaxi had said, if they melted or broke the lock, they would prevent the door from opening. That might be desirable when an angry and armed guard was on the other side, but not now.

We're going to have to sign up for some engineering courses, Jaxi.

I already read Denhoft's Theories on Aerodynamic and Aerostatic Flight*, and those two extremely dry engineering books in that prison library. They were not illuminating.*

Sardelle found the latch and tried to lift it out of the door, but it couldn't move until the mechanism behind it disengaged. She left that area and probed around the other walls, trying to determine if they were metal too. Unfortunately, they were made from the same thick steel as the door. As was the floor and ceiling. It was interesting that she could sense the dragon blood through the walls, since iron blocked magic, and there was plenty of iron in steel. Maybe there was simply so much power that it bled through.

I should have asked Tolemek for one of his jars of burning goo, Sardelle thought. *Or I should have had him teach me how to make it.*

Maybe I could melt a hole in the door. It's even thicker than that glass, so it would take a while, but I've melted cast iron before.

A hole? Why not melt the whole door?

You don't want much, do you?

It's either that or we have to master the lock.

I'll melt the door.

Chapter 14

Ridge tumbled through the darkness, his back, then shoulders, then head striking against the sides of some kind of diagonal shaft. Knowing he might break every bone in his body when he landed—*if* he ever landed—he tried to slow himself down by grabbing at the walls. But they were cold and smooth and too far apart for him to brace himself against. And then they disappeared. Ridge fell straight down, plummeting through emptiness, and in the dark, he couldn't prepare himself for a landing.

He fell into a surprisingly soft pile of dust that flew up everywhere, coating his eyes and tongue. The landing was still jarring, but not nearly as much as if he had struck stone or dirt.

Something heavy smacked his chest, and he let out a pained, "Oof."

That hurt more than the landing. Ridge pushed the object away, only to realize it was someone's arm. Had the whole team fallen into that hole? That trap, he amended with a mental kick to his own butt. He'd allowed his people to be herded right toward it. And here he'd thought having a sorceress along would make everything easier, that it would let him succeed where Kaika and Nowon had failed. What a fool.

Judging by the thud and the flinging of more dust in every direction, someone else landed.

"Sardelle?" Ridge hoped she was with them, because if she wasn't… she was stuck up there with those statues.

"No," Tolemek said, removing his arm from Ridge's hand. "She, Cas, and your other lieutenant were farther away."

"Duck?" Ridge asked.

"Yes."

"Apex, are you down here too?"

A groan came from a few feet away.

"I'll take that for a yes," Ridge said. That had definitely been a masculine groan. "I have a first-aid kit somewhere." His rucksack hadn't come off his shoulders during the fall. "Are you injured?"

"Yes," Apex said, a wince in his voice, "but if you're the only option for medical services, I think I'd rather leave my health to fate."

“There’s nothing wrong with my medical skills.” Ridge groped his way over to Apex.

“Aren’t you the one who offered to staple General Paltimer’s nostrils shut to heal his sinus infection, last fall?”

“That had nothing to do with clogged sinuses. I was going to staple his nostrils shut so he wouldn’t be offended by the stench of Tiger Squadron’s failure—his words—on the Dasikar Bay mission. I thought that was quite polite of me.” And if it had earned him a demerit, it had been worth it, for the look on that pompous ass’s face.

“Ah, I was mistaken.” Apex’s breathing was labored, his voice weak.

Ridge shrugged off his pack. “Let me find a match, see how you look. See where we are, too, maybe.”

“Underground,” Tolemek said.

“Yes, that’s obvious. But what is this? The garbage dump? The prison where idiot trespassers are deposited?” Ridge wiped his eyes. Whatever that dust was, it was clinging to every part of him. It was humid and hot down here as well, almost as if they had fallen into a furnace room. Maybe they had. This might be ash they had landed in.

“Obvious because we fell, perhaps, but confusing since we shouldn’t have,” Tolemek said. “How could there possibly be a basement when the ground all around this mountain is full of water under pressure and heat? You’d think any attempt to dig out earth down here would result in it being flooded. The mountain *itself* is odd.”

“I’ll trust you on that one. I was too busy making paper fliers to pay much attention during my geology class in school.” Ridge had two emergency candles in his pack. The first one he found was broken, but he pulled out a second one intact. “The other science classes too. And when I had that extremely tedious math teacher in third year, I spent at least a month perfecting a launching catapult for my flier. Or was it a trebuchet? I get those two mixed up.”

“It’s reassuring to know the man leading our mission is so well-educated,” Tolemek said.

“I know my weaknesses. That’s why you’re along. Did nobody tell you that you’d be the brains out here?”

Apex grunted. “Please.”

“I assumed I would be the cannon fodder, should things go wrong.” After a moment where he was probably contemplating the subterranean darkness, Tolemek added, “Wronger.”

Ridge lit the candle. “Only if you don’t have a bottle of goo in your bag that can get us back to the others.”

The weak flame didn’t reveal much beyond the grime-smeared faces of the two men sitting on top of a pile of dirt with him. No, it

was ash. He had been right. If there was a furnace somewhere, he couldn't see it in the shadows beyond the candle's influence. He had the sense of another large room, not as big as that entrance chamber perhaps, but the ceiling—he could just make out the black hole they must have been dumped through—was about twenty feet above them. They were lucky they hadn't all been killed in the fall.

Apex was lying on his back. His cap had fallen off somewhere, and the fine ash had turned his hair gray. His face was pale too. Ridge did a quick survey of him and didn't find any blood, but the way he gripped his ribs and kept his inhalations shallow told him much.

"I'll bandage your ribs," Ridge said. "No staples."

Apex managed a quick smile, but his eyes were haunted. Ridge knew that look, the sense of fear when one's mortality caught up with a man, the awareness that this might be the last mission. If he had internal bleeding, he might have a reason for that fear, but he couldn't know. Best to make him believe he would be fine.

"It's probably just a couple of cracked ribs," Ridge said. "You'll be able to walk, shoot Cofah, and find a way out with us." Ridge wished his candle had hinted at a set of stairs leading up. Tolemek was rooting in his satchel. Maybe he had some more candles and could do a search. "And we'll catch back up with Sardelle. She can heal you."

"She can do that?" A hint of hope brightened Apex's eyes.

"Yup, that's what she was trained to do back when she… oh, that's a long story. And probably more hers to tell than mine."

"Is it the story of how she came to be in our world—in our *time*? Because she doesn't really fit here."

Huh, Ridge wouldn't have guessed Apex had been paying that much attention or could have guessed that. "What clued you in?"

"There are some words she says like they said them a few centuries ago. And the instruction note in the box that held the communication crystals—I looked over it after we dealt with the pirates—there were diaereses over half of the vowels. Those fell by the wayside about two hundred years ago, at least on Iskandia. The Cofah still use them, but nothing else added up to Sardelle being Cofah."

Ridge wasn't sure whether he should encourage Apex to talk when he was hurt, but it seemed to be distracting him from his pain. He had to be the only one in the squadron who could find linguistics talk distracting, instead of painful in its own right.

"How long have you known? And sit up, will you? So I can wrap you." Ridge held up the roll of bandage. "Here, hold this candle, too, eh?" He helped Apex sit up, grimacing at the gasps of pain his pilot made.

"You're a demanding doctor," Apex rasped.

"A demanding doctor who's cranky because his nostrils are caked

with ash." And because he didn't have enough hands free to do everything he wanted.

"Perhaps you should have stapled them shut."

"Perhaps."

Tolemek stood up, a small, sphere-shaped lantern in his hand. "I'm going to look around."

"Good. Find us the way out, will you?" Ridge said.

Apex only glowered silently at him. Ah, yes, being trapped in a garbage dump in an enemy fortress with the two people who loathed each other. This would be fun.

Tolemek walked by as he headed off the ash mound, pressing something into Ridge's hand as he passed. Apex, looking the other way, didn't notice the exchange. The small ceramic jar was labeled healing salve. Ah, yes. Ridge had heard about this and that it was very effective. Good.

Maybe thinking that the two men loathed each other had been inaccurate—only Apex seemed to loathe Tolemek. What would Tolemek do, Ridge wondered, if Apex challenged him to that duel one day?

"I've seen your school records, sir," Apex muttered when Tolemek was out of earshot. "You paid attention at least some of the time."

"You've *seen* my school records?" Ridge squinted at the jar—the single candle in Apex's hand didn't shed a lot of light—but didn't see anything resembling directions. He slipped the lid off. "If they're on display somewhere besides my mom's icebox, I'm going to be appalled."

"They're not on display. I snooped. When I received invitations to join both Wolf Squadron and Eagle Squadron, I was trying to decide where I wanted to go. Since Eagle is stationed up north, it would have been closer to my home grounds, not that there's much up there for me anymore." He didn't bother glowering at Tolemek this time, but Apex did watch him walking the perimeter of the chamber, searching for exits with his small lantern.

"Isn't Colonel Kensingbar a math and engineering maestro? I know he taught classes at the academy when he was on the disabled list a couple of years ago." Ridge's grades hadn't been *that* impressive. There had to be another explanation. He dipped a corner of bandage into the salve jar and smeared it on Apex's ribs.

"Kensingbar failed two history classes and barely passed Iskandian Literature. That's unacceptable."

"And here I thought you'd joined my squadron because I bought you a beer."

Apex frowned down at Ridge's ministrations. "What is that?"

"An antiseptic?"

"It's not the army one."

"No." Ridge set it down, so he could start wrapping bandages before Apex started doing something juvenile, like rubbing the salve off.

Apex scowled at the corner of the chamber Tolemek was inspecting, then scowled at Ridge. "You're putting his cursed witch brews on me. I don't want—"

"Too bad," Ridge said. "Now, stay still."

Apex tried to pull away, but the sudden movement made him hiss with pain. "I refuse. That's not army-tested and approved. I don't want his dragons-damned slime on me."

Ridge gripped Apex's shoulder before he could stand up and hurt himself further. "Sit *down*, Lieutenant." He hated pretending to be a disciplinarian—him of all people, who made a habit of lipping off to senior officers—but he wasn't going to let the friction between these two threaten the mission—or a man's health. "I didn't ask for your opinion on the goo, and I don't care about it, quite frankly. You are welcome to file a complaint when we get back. My willingness to use an unapproved healing product will be a minor crime compared to what else goes on the docket for my court-martial, but maybe your grievance will be addressed." He hurried to finish wrapping Apex's ribs, while he was sitting still.

"My grievance isn't with *you*, sir," Apex said, his eyes pained, probably not from his wounds this time.

"I know, and you can challenge him to a duel later, but I don't want any trouble until we're out of here." Ridge didn't want it later, either, but he'd figure out a way to deal with that when the time came.

Apex sighed dramatically but didn't protest.

"These walls are iron," Tolemek said from the far end of the chamber. "I think the ceiling is too. There are some tubes in the floor over here. And in the walls too. I think they might be for taking samples."

"To make sure the magma chamber isn't heating up so much that the mountain will blow?" Ridge asked.

Tolemek looked over. "Sounds like you didn't sleep through your *entire* geology class."

"No, volcanoes are interesting. Any boy will perk up at the prospect of things exploding, erupting, or otherwise making booms. And if there's a way we could blow up this mountain once we have those samples and get our people out of here, I'd be very open to hearing about it."

"Judging by the size of the Taiga of Boiling Death, there wouldn't be a safe place to hide within hundreds of miles if a volcano-like

eruption occurred."

Tolemek stopped in front of a couple of machines. *Weapons,* if the huge gun-barrel-like protuberances were an indication. And they were pointing right at the ash pile—and those on top of it. Ridge hoped those were simple artillery weapons and nothing powered by dragon blood, or that possessed glowing red eyes. He looked ceiling-ward, thinking of Sardelle again. He hoped she and the others were all right. She should have been able to help the team run out past those statues if there was no way up the lift. Having them safe would be good, but it also might mean Ridge, Tolemek, and Apex were the only ones who might be able to complete the mission.

"Interesting," Tolemek said. "These machines are attached to pipes that run into the walls, and there's some kind of…" He wandered around a metal box on the ground. "Engine? Generator? I'd have to take off the cover to know for certain. Maybe. Engineering isn't my specialty. But it looks like the scientists here might be experimenting with using the heat supplied by the hot springs to power these weapons."

"And here I was thinking we'd been tossed into the garbage dump," Ridge said.

"This may be a testing facility." Tolemek pointed at the ash pile. "That could be the remains of whatever they've been testing the weapons on."

"Like… the last people who fell down the trap?" Ridge looked at the gray powder smearing the back of his hand. "Comforting."

"I suspect there's too much ash for human beings to have been the sole contributors to the pile," Apex said, tugging down his shirt—Ridge had finished the bandaging job.

"There's ash on the floor back here, too," Tolemek said. "It's everywhere."

"What I'd really like to hear about is a door." Ridge took back his candle and slid down the powdery slope to the floor. He kicked aside some of the layer of ash Tolemek had mentioned. The floor beneath it looked like iron too. "Am I correct in guessing that iron has a higher melting point than the temperature of lava?"

"Yes," Tolemek and Apex said together.

"I can't imagine how they engineered this though," Tolemek added. "I hadn't thought… This whole facility seems far more advanced than what I'd expect from my people. I always thought—it's not general knowledge, of course, but those with an iota of global awareness know we've fallen behind on technological advancements in favor of focusing on military resources."

"Those guns look like military resources to me." Ridge pointed at the pair of monstrosities near the wall, then a door in the shadows

nearby drew his attention.

"Yes… this facility must have been built here with the intent of figuring out how to weaponize the geysers or the magma below them. When they found the dragon blood, they must have thought of this place, since it has such an inhospitable location."

"Let's worry about the historical details later." Ridge tried the knob on the door he had found. Locked. Of course. The sturdy metal didn't look like anything one could kick down, either. "The others will be worried about us. Tolemek, can you open this door?"

Tolemek joined him and dug into his satchel for his vial again. The contents had gone down considerably.

"How many more doors will you be able to do?" Ridge asked, watching Tolemek brush the substance on.

"Not many. I'm on my last vial now. I used quite a bit at the asylum." Tolemek lowered his voice to mutter, "For naught."

"I heard you got some clues at least."

Tolemek's grunt wasn't enthused.

"You're not giving up, are you?"

"No."

A deep clank emanated from the wall behind the weapons. Soft clicks came from the metal boxes Tolemek had been looking at earlier. They were attached to the big guns by thick pipes that also attached to the wall. A faint hum started up from the weapons themselves, a deep note that reverberated through the entire chamber.

"Now what?" Apex grumbled, as he slowly made his way over to join them.

"Now we open that door even faster," Ridge said. "Need any help with that, Tee?"

"No." Tolemek eyed him through his ropes of hair. "Tee?"

"Your name's too long, and I haven't come up with a suitable nickname for you yet."

"Yet? I thought that dubious honor was reserved for your pilots."

"Anyone's a fair target." Ridge drummed his fingers on the wall as the circle of goo started to smoke. He eyed the weapons. "They're pointed at the ash pile, not us, so we should be fine, right?"

"Maybe," Apex said. "Maybe not. We fell into a security system. You wouldn't think you could avoid being incinerated by simply moving out of the way."

"There *is* ash everywhere." Tolemek knelt back from the door, apparently having done all he could until the goop finished eating through the metal.

Ridge hoped it wasn't a *thick* door. "It's getting hotter. The weapons. They're radiating heat like furnaces." The hum was growing louder, too, with the pitch becoming less deep.

“I think it’s a fancy crematorium.” Apex pointed at the layers of ash. “Everything that falls down here gets incinerated, not just what’s in the pile. There’s just a pile because more things fall over there.” He backed up until he bumped into the wall next to the smoking door. “And if we’re in here when the weapons go off, we’ll be incinerated too.”

“A reasonable hypothesis,” Tolemek said.

Ridge thought of Nowon’s body, the way his skin had been melted off. Had *he* fallen down here? Or into some other trap powered by the heat of the earth?

“How’s that door coming along?” Ridge almost gave it a kick to check for himself, but he didn’t know if doing that too early might disrupt the goo.

“Soon,” Tolemek said.

The hum was growing higher and higher in pitch. “It’s definitely building to something.” Ridge jerked a thumb at the door. “Will we be safe as soon as we get out?”

“Eventually. I’m not sure *how* far we’ll have to be. The heat could pour through my hole, and if it’s just a tunnel or staircase on the other side, it could be quite intense out there.” Tolemek gave the door a kick.

“Go, go,” Ridge urged. He wanted to leap through himself, but ushered Apex through. Thanks to his injury, he would be slowest and needed any head start he could get.

Thankfully, he didn’t object. Apex cried out as the sides scraped his ribs, but he hurled himself through the hole without hesitation. Tolemek grabbed his bag and dove through next. With the high-pitched hum so loud and powerful it felt as if it were tunneling through his eardrums, Ridge scrambled after them.

His candle went out, but Tolemek still had his lantern and led the way up a set of cement stairs. An impossibly long set of stairs that disappeared into the darkness above. Ridge sprinted up them and could have passed the others. Instead, he urged them on with pats on the back. They might have been shoves. All he could think about was the expression, “Heat rises.”

The hum culminated in a strange wail and flash so intense it flooded through the hole and up the stairs, lighting every shadow with the power of the sun. A wave of heat slammed into Ridge’s back, wrapping around him like water. *Hot* water. It seared his skin, and he was terrified that it might be melting his flesh right from his bones. No, that would hurt more. It had to, didn’t it? The heat was uncomfortable, but he wasn’t in agony. Not yet. He kept running, sprinting up those stairs even though his thigh muscles burned, and the air he breathed seared his lungs and scraped his throat raw.

Something burned his hand, and he cursed, imagining skin melting off. Tolemek's lantern didn't provide enough light for him to see the wound. Maybe that was for the best. He ran on.

After an eternity or two, the heat finally faded. The machines cycling off? Or maybe they had simply run out of reach.

Apex stumbled and went down, grasping his ribs. "A minute. Please. Just need—"

"Take it." Ridge stopped, putting a hand on his shoulder. The door they had escaped through had fallen back into darkness and disappeared from view.

"The top is ahead," Tolemek said. "I see another door."

It felt like they had climbed enough stairs to have run out the top of the mountain and up into the heavens by now. Ridge rested a hand against the wall. There was something lumpy on the side of his palm, deadening his feeling. He gulped, remembering that pain he had felt. He held his hand up toward Tolemek's light, afraid of what he would see.

Then he laughed.

"Glad you find the news so promising," Tolemek said.

"My hand is covered with wax," Ridge said.

Both men stared at him.

"The candle melted," Ridge explained. "I thought—never mind. A door, you say? Any chance this one isn't locked?" He doubted it.

Apex shifted, and Ridge helped him stand up.

"I'm fine, sir."

"Good."

"It *is* unlocked," Tolemek said.

"I hope whatever's on the other side is cool," Ridge said. "My skin feels like… I don't even know. A bad sunburn."

"Be glad that's all we got." Tolemek pressed an ear to the door, listened, then shook his head. "I don't hear anything."

Ridge eased past Apex, drew his pistol, and nodded for Tolemek to open the door. "Ready."

He stepped past Tolemek and into a cement hallway, ready to fire in either direction. A second or two passed before he realized there was a dead guard on the floor. Like the first one they had encountered, his neck had been slit.

"When nothing's going your way, it's comforting to know that things aren't going the enemy's way, either," Ridge murmured.

Ridge?

He jumped, surprised by the voice, even though he recognized it an instant later. *Sardelle?*

You're alive! The relief that came through the link almost brought tears to his eyes. He was relieved to know Sardelle was alive, too, but

her emotion was more intense.

You thought I wasn't?

I couldn't sense you. Neither could Jaxi. I thought…

Oh. We were in a, a crematorium, I guess you could call it. The walls were metal. Iron.

Sardelle had admitted once that she couldn't sense things through iron. *Ah.*

Where are you now? Are Ahn and Duck all right too? Did you have to go back out?

We're all here. We deactivated the statues and went up. But we're… in a little trouble now. If you could find us, we could use Tolemek's help.

Just his? Not mine?

Maybe you can hold his bag.

Very funny. I don't know where we are. You haven't found a map, have you?

"Sir?"

"Hm?"

"I asked if you had a preference as to which way."

"Hold on. I'm seeing if we can get directions."

A surprisingly strong grip latched onto his forearm. "Caslin?" Tolemek asked. "Is she all right?"

Ridge nodded. "Yes, they went up."

Jaxi says for you to take the wider hallway, go up two more flights of stairs, and look for the lift on the floor with all the labs. There are some stairs at the other end that should lead to our level, one up from there. We're on the other side of the lift though, so you'll have to figure out a way to burn through a metal wall to get to us. Oh, also, there are people along your route. If they're like the people we've run into, they'll be expecting trouble. Us.

At this point, I'd be delighted to deal with something as normal as "people." Ridge pointed down the wider hallway and started walking. "This way. Stay alert." *Where are you now? You said you needed help?*

We've found the vault, but we've been shut off from the lift. Sardelle sounded sheepish. *We're locked in for the moment.*

The vault? The vault full of dragon blood?

Yes. But if Jaxi can't melt a hole in the door, that's where we'll need Tolemek. She thinks she can handle it, but she does have a high opinion of her abilities.

I'd never have guessed.

By the way, Jaxi has had time to inspect the mountain and says the peak can open and that the hot air balloons are stored up there. That may be our way out once we're done.

Understood. We'll get to you. Don't take any chances until we get the team back together, all right?

They had been “speaking” back and forth rapidly, and Ridge expected a prompt answer. He followed Apex up the first set of stairs Jaxi had mentioned—since he was distracted, he was letting Apex lead—and onto the second set before prompting Sardelle again.

Right?

No answer.

He cursed softly.

“Sir?” Apex.

“I’m afraid the others are… taking chances.”

Chapter 15

"Sardelle?" came Ahn's soft call from the front of the corridor.

"What is it?" Sardelle had been about to finish talking with Ridge and join the two lieutenants—Jaxi was heating up, preparing herself for her attempt to melt the door, and it was about to be far too hot for a human to stand close.

She had no more than reached Ahn and Duck when a soft scrape came from the ceiling in the corner of the big lift room. There was a square hole there that she hadn't noticed before. It looked like some kind of vent or duct entrance with the grate removed. Ah, there was the grate lying on the floor. Ahn and Duck were both aiming at the hole.

Ridge was asking something, and Sardelle was about to answer when a tin canister dropped through the hole. Duck fired.

"Wait," Ahn whispered, "we don't know what it is." The warning came too late. The bullet took the canister in the side, and smoke poured out of the hole.

It was a different color than the earlier smoke weapon, a reddish-pink this time, and Sardelle's stomach roiled as soon as the first fumes reached her nose.

"Hold your breath," Duck said. He kept standing there, like he meant to hold his breath and shoot whoever came out of the duct, but Sardelle's senses screamed that this was more dangerous than the other smoke, that it had toxic properties.

"Get back," she whispered. "Both of you."

She could have made a shield, an airtight bubble around herself, but she wouldn't be able to attack through it, so she pushed past them and focused on the smoke billowing from the can. She drew air from the room behind her and pushed it against the air in that corner. Her churning stomach made it hard to concentrate, but she managed to squash the smoke into a small area for a moment.

She was debating on how to destroy the canister and the tainted air completely when the first guard dropped through the hole. Well armed—and wearing a mask—he landed in a crouch.

Sardelle waved her hand and ripped the mask from his face at the

same time as a second guard landed, this one aiming straight at her. A shot came before she could raise a shield to protect herself. But the shot came from behind her, not from the man. Ahn had leaned around the corner, risking the smoke. The man in the mask pitched to the floor.

The guard who had dropped into the room first had fallen to his knees and was clutching his neck. Eyes huge, he reached for the mask Sardelle had ripped off, but he collapsed before he touched it. She didn't know whether he was dead or unconscious, but the ramifications horrified her either way.

"Get back," she repeated to Ahn and returned to trying to confine the smoke. Sticking it back into the canister was impossible, but she did what she should have done immediately. Using the surrounding air again, she pushed the smoke up to the ceiling and into the hole—she could sense more people in the ductworks up there, now that she was looking for them. She tried to usher the gas toward them. It was like trying to throw sand through a hole, but if she could at least get most of it out of their space…

Her stomach interrupted her fight. Clutching at her gut, she ran from the room. She could have vomited right there, but she didn't want the people in the duct to hear her and believe they had affected her. Instead she ran back to the first observation room, just managing to pass through the doorway before heaving her dinner all over the floor. She gripped the wall, her sides and chest aching from the effort even as she was unable to stop the spasms. What *was* that gas? She thought of the inhalant Tolemek had created. It couldn't be related to that, could it be? If it was, would she die in seconds?

Don't die. I'm working on the door. Getting through it.

Sardelle finished throwing up, but she couldn't manage the mental energy to respond. Her body was shaking, and sweat poured down the sides of her face. She wanted to collapse on the floor, but that was a mess now, and her dignity overrode her physical weakness. She staggered toward the hall, hoping to find a clean place to slump against a wall. She also hoped nobody would notice the mess she had made if she closed the door behind her.

But Duck was standing in the corridor outside. His face was flushed red and bathed in sweat, and he looked like he had thrown up somewhere too. He gave her a lopsided smile, though.

"You're human."

Yes, sorcerers could vomit, the same as anyone else. All she said was, "Apparently so."

"That's not." Duck stepped aside to nod toward the back of the corridor.

Jaxi lay on the floor, where Sardelle had left her, but a bright two-

inch-thick orange stream of energy shot out of the tip of her blade, flames dancing along the beam. Sardelle didn't think the flames were necessary. Jaxi had probably added them for flair.

"No, that is a special soul." Sardelle turned toward the open end of the corridor. "Ahn?"

"Here," Ahn called softly. "There are more vent grates in that room. I'm watching them, but we should check in those little rooms too." Her face was also flushed, and her hands shook, but she hadn't dropped her gun, and she looked like she would die there in the mouth of the corridor rather than leave her self-assigned post.

"Ridge and Tolemek are alive," Sardelle said.

Ahn glanced back at her.

"Apex too. I thought you should know before you decided to get suicidal defending us."

"Good." Ahn didn't deny the suicidal bit. Hm.

"I'll watch with you," Sardelle said. "I'll know how to react now. Canister goes back up into the hole before it explodes."

"Or some idiot shoots it," Duck muttered from behind them.

"I'm sure it was designed to spit the gas out anyway," Ahn said.

Sardelle's stomach gave another little twinge. She wasn't sure if she had gotten enough of the gas out of the room to keep them from suffering further deleterious effects, but she hoped so. That guard still wasn't moving. The first one had been shot dead, but she felt compelled to check on the second. If he was still alive, she might be able to do something for him. But he must have caught an entire lungful of that gas, or maybe his body tolerated it less well than others. Either way, he was dead.

Remembering that she had been communicating with Ridge when all of this had started, Sardelle reached out to him again. *Ridge?*

Sardelle, you're all right?

She decided not to mention the vomit. Or the fact that her belly was still shivering with the aftereffects of that vile concoction. Tolemek must have a like-minded soul here. She shuddered, imagining going up against that person.

For the moment, we're fine. Still stuck, but fine.

Good. We're trying to get to you. We're—

Busy? Sardelle guessed when a moment passed without a response. She stretched out, trying to find him in the maze of a mountain, but she ran into the Cofah first. There were more guards moving around in the ducts above the front room, and a pair of them were crawling along on elbows and knees, making their way over the laboratories. They must be angling for a vent in one of those observation rooms.

She almost missed Ridge's response of, *Yeah.*

We have more trouble to deal with here, she told him. *Be careful. I'll*

check on you as soon as I can.

Wait, Ridge added. *Do you know how those soldiers blew up your mountain three hundred years ago?*

What? I mean, why do you want to know?

I'd like to do the same thing here, if possible. After we leave.

Sardelle shuddered at the idea of collapsing the mountain with people in it, even if they were Cofah soldiers and scientists making deadly weapons to fling at her homeland. She didn't have an answer for him anyway. *I don't know what they used exactly. It was all a blur of running to the meeting point and assuming others would make it too. I didn't see any of the detonations myself and don't even know if it was some form of magic or not—though it seems strange that they would have used magic against the very magic users they feared and wanted to destroy.*

All right. A determination accompanied his words, like he meant to succeed with that plan, one way or another.

She trusted he would warn her in advance, so she would worry about the most pressing problem first.

"Ahn," Sardelle whispered, "two are trying to come in behind us. I'll be right back."

Ahn gave her a quick salute. There wasn't likely any thought behind it, beyond acknowledging her words, but it made Sardelle smile anyway. It was as if she had been accepted as part of the squadron. Who knew vomit would do that?

She walked back toward Jaxi. Heat was rolling off that vault door, and noxious smoke as well—their lungs would all need the attention of a healer after this—but Sardelle couldn't tell if the soulblade had broken through yet. She would ask for an update after she dealt with the two guards.

She slipped into an unlit observation room. Whatever lay beyond the glass in this one, it was too dark to tell. What lay above the ceiling was more concerning. Enough light seeped in from the corridor that she made out a vent in one corner. She closed her eyes and once again located the approaching men. Inspired by Jaxi's heat wave, she applied some energy of her own to the bottom of the duct, close to the vent. Her mind ached, and her eyes felt gritty, like she needed to close them for a few hours—or a few days. She had been expending too much of her power and feared her muscles were trembling from more than the effects of that poison. Still, she managed to heat the thin duct metal nicely and was rewarded with a yelp of pain when the first man reached it, placing his hand on the hot spot.

He shuffled back in a rush, bumping into the guard behind him. They were right above Sardelle, with tools in hand to remove the vent covering. She wasn't going to allow that. In fact… she examined them more closely until she found another of those canisters. She yanked it

from the pouch where the second man had it stored. If the vent grate had already been removed, she would have pulled it down into the room with her, so she could stuff it in a cabinet somewhere the Cofah couldn't use it. Instead she hurled it down the duct behind the guards. She sensed other men nearby, all jerking their heads up in alarm at the sound of the tin can clattering toward them. She contemplated puncturing a hole and letting that gas spew forth, but not when someone had died after exposure to it. She couldn't do that, even to her enemies. With luck, simply hearing the canister clanging around would distract the men for a time. They would wonder if it might have been triggered, and they would have trouble finding it in the dark.

Good plan. Jaxi sounded tired, exhausted. Even if a soulblade had no physical body that required food and rest, its stores of power weren't unlimited. Jaxi, too, would need a break to recharge.

When Sardelle returned to the corridor—it was like stepping into a sauna—the increase in energy crackling in the air told her that the vault had been breached before her eyes did. Her own weariness combined with the intensity of the power almost forced her to her knees. She braced her hand on the doorjamb. It wasn't malevolent power or benevolent power. Just power. A lot of power.

I'm done. Jaxi's beam winked out.

The light level fell, but there were enough lanterns lit in nearby rooms that Sardelle could see the end of the hall. And she could see a giant hole in the door, its ragged sides melted like candle wax with drops of molten steel spattered on the tile floor.

"That's impressive," Sardelle murmured.

Thank you.

"What's going on up there, Sardelle?" Ahn asked from the front of the corridor, jerking her chin toward the ceiling. Duck stood next to her, frowning upward too.

"A little confusion. We should have a moment before they try anything else." Sardelle walked to Jaxi, intending to sheath her, but so much heat radiated from the blade that she was afraid the hilt would burn her hand.

Give me a moment to cool down. I'm sizzling. You couldn't handle me.

No surprise there. You need a dragon to handle your heat.

Jaxi snorted. *Alas, he's not here. Just his blood. And considering how much blood has been carted in here, I doubt he's in very good condition wherever he is.*

"Is it safe to go in?" Ahn had crept up beside Sardelle. Duck remained on guard, or maybe he wasn't comfortable walking past a naked soulblade and into a vault filled with magical blood.

"Should be." Sardelle had already searched the area around the

door thoroughly and didn't think any traps had eluded her. "Just watch out for the dripping steel."

The drips were already hardening, creating a strange image, almost like the top of a cave with numerous small stalactites dangling down. The Cofah would doubtlessly wonder what had happened to their technologically superior door.

When Ahn didn't rush inside, Sardelle grabbed a lantern and went first. Entering the hole was almost like walking underwater, pushing against the current of power. For her anyway. Ahn breezed inside as if there was nothing abnormal about the place.

There wouldn't have been room for anyone else in the small vault. A wooden crate in the center took up most of the floor space. It was covered with FRAGILE warnings and shipping labels. The back wall held shelves, mostly empty, with one supporting a rack of test tubes filled with blood. Several empty racks occupied other shelves.

"Does that mean they're almost out of their supply?" Ahn pointed at the empty racks.

"I don't think so." Sardelle touched the crate. "Most of the energy is coming from here."

"Energy?"

"Yes, I can feel it. It's very intense."

"Should we open it?"

Sardelle knelt and examined the shipping labels. It had been checked in at Port Krunlow and Bekany Bay, both along the Cofah coast, but the label that would have mentioned its origins had been ripped off.

Ahn lifted one corner. "The crate is heavy, but two of us could carry it. Maybe we should just take the whole thing."

"Carry it where? We haven't figured out how to get off this floor yet."

"The Cofah are getting here through the vents."

Yes, and she would have to tell Ridge about that possibility as an access point. And about the canisters. She shuddered at the idea of him running into that smoke.

"Guess we can't carry this box through a vent though," Ahn said.

"No. Let's open it."

Ahn slung her rifle onto her back and withdrew a big utility knife. Though it looked like a simple shipping crate, Sardelle tried to sense the insides before Ahn broke in. If there was a trap, she couldn't tell. She had a vague sense of numerous tubes of blood, but their power distorted their surroundings. At the moment, Sardelle would have a hard time sensing her own gender.

Fortunately not something that's likely to have changed in the last five minutes.

Let's hope so.

Unless that smoke had some very strange side effects.

I see you're recovering well from your ordeal, Jaxi.

I'm exhausted. I'm going to need you to carry me out of here.

Sardelle snorted.

At the noise, Ahn paused in the middle of sliding her blade into the crack under the lid and looked up.

"Just… soulblade humor. Carry on."

"Uh, all right."

Ahn popped open the crate and pushed aside the top. Inside, packed in wads of dried foliage, lay racks of test tubes. There must have been two hundred and fifty vials, all full of blood.

"Huh. I was sort of expecting them to glow or something," Ahn said.

"Energy doesn't glow. It just is."

Ahn sniffed. "Smells good, though. I assume that's this stuff and not the blood." She picked up a handful of dried leaves and flowers.

Sardelle stared at the foliage. It had clearly been used for nothing more than insulation, to keep the tubes from breaking, but that purple flower… She plucked it out of Ahn's hand.

"Something wrong?" Ahn asked.

"I've seen this recently," Sardelle whispered.

"Where? It looks tropical."

"On the wall of an asylum room two hundred miles from here."

. . . . .

They found a third dead Cofah at the top of the last set of stairs. The man had been killed in the same manner as the others, with a slit throat. Ridge, Tolemek, and Apex had already fought their way past a group of scientists whose hearts hadn't been in the battle. They had hurled a few flasks of smoking compounds at them, but the men and women had looked like they had been in the middle of packing. Either way, they hadn't been trained warriors and had fled as soon as Ridge's team proved capable of putting up a fight. Not wanting to shoot civilians, Ridge had let them go. He hoped he wouldn't regret that later.

As they stepped over the body, Ridge wondered once more who was inadvertently helping them storm the mountain. All of the kills had been recent.

"I wonder if we'll stumble across our ally soon," Apex said.

"I'd like to stumble across the rest of our squadron first." Ridge led them down a wide corridor with glass-walled labs on both sides. These were similar to the ones on the level below, and though he didn't see anyone scurrying around, there were also boxes and bags out, half

stuffed with equipment and notebooks. “Were they packing because of us? Or do they know something we don’t know?”

A soft clank came from above. Ridge jerked his rifle upward. There were no floating lanterns on this level, and shadows cloaked the ceiling. A long moment passed, and nothing moved. He lowered his weapon, but vowed to glance upward often. At this point, Ridge wouldn’t be surprised by anything they crossed. In addition to the laboratories, they had passed chambers full of half-assembled fliers and unmanned craft, along with rooms full of devices for containing and studying the steam and hot water from the geyser field.

Tolemek walked to a lab table full of beakers and a complicated maze of glass tubes—Ridge couldn’t guess what it was for, though some green liquid rested in a spherical ball in the middle of it. A notebook open on the table was what drew Tolemek’s eye. He stared at the page, then flipped to the front, then glowered at the glass apparatus.

“Something important?” Ridge wanted to keep going, to find the others and the blood and to figure out a way to escape, preferably while destroying most of the scientists’ work on the way.

“I *thought* so,” Tolemek growled, sounding more like a riled bear than a man.

“What?” Ridge asked.

“That formula they hit us with downstairs, it seemed familiar. This is my work. Based on it anyway. It looks like someone lifted my notes from a few years ago and mailed them here.” Tolemek slammed the book shut. “If it was Goroth, I’ll kill him again.”

“Their fliers are clearly based on our designs,” Apex said. “The Cofah seem to struggle with originality.”

Tolemek gave him a flat look, knocked the apparatus on the floor with a great shattering of glass, and strode onward.

“Good idea,” Ridge said. “Let’s make sure the enemy knows exactly where we are at all steps in our journey.”

Tolemek was too busy stalking and glowering to respond. Ridge jogged back into the lead. The lift doors were visible at the end of the lab area. All they had to do now was find a way to reach Sardelle and the others on the other side. A side that was unfortunately blocked. He glanced upward. She had mentioned a top level where the hot air balloons were kept. Maybe there was a way to go up and over.

Ridge?

Yes. We’re close.

Men have been attacking us through the vents. You should be able to reach us the same way.

Ridge grimaced, imagining gunfights in a snarl of tight duct passages.

They've quieted down now, Sardelle added. *I think they may be leaving to try something else. If you do run into them, be very careful. They have cans full of a smoke that's killed one person and made the rest of us sick. A big enough inhalation might kill anyone.* Her words came with an image of pale red smoke blowing out of a canister.

Wonderful.

Perhaps better news is that we've gotten into the vault and have the dragon blood.

Ridge lifted his head. That *was* better news. *How much is there?*

A crate full. Carrying it out as is might be problematic, but if we split the burden between all of us, it might be doable.

The king *had* wanted samples. But the true mission was to deny the Cofah of this resource. *No sign of the dragon itself, eh?*

The crate came from, well, we're not sure exactly, but a tropical region. It's traveled quite a ways to get here.

Oh? I'd hate to think the Cofah could simply… order more.

Maybe your next mission will be to find the source. If the king is still talking to you when we get back.

Ridge snorted. A legitimate concern.

There's more. Tell Tolemek… Oh, wait. Jaxi is communicating with him.

Tolemek had stopped walking and his glower had changed to an expression of confusion.

I'll explain further later, Sardelle went on, *but Tolemek's sister may be caught up in all of this somehow. Either to get at him or for… other reasons. It's possible she's been moved to the same location as these vials came from.*

Strange. Do you—

The elevator doors slid open, revealing a cluster of crimson-uniformed guards, all wearing protective vests and all carrying rifles or—

Ridge cursed. Was that a rocket launcher?

He and the others were still twenty meters from the end of the room. "Take cover," he barked and lunged to the left, toward a lab table piled with books and equipment.

Apex and Tolemek lunged right, finding a thick column to hide behind. The Cofah spotted them right away, and bullets were skipping off the marble floor before Ridge had fully flung himself behind the desk. One struck the pile of books atop it, knocking a tome off onto his head.

"Because my head hasn't taken enough damage this week," he grumbled.

He shot a couple of rounds around the side of the desk, trying to take out a few of the guards before they rushed into the room and also

found cover, but another clank came from the ceiling, this one louder than the last. A vent grate dropped to the floor behind Apex and Tolemek. A canister rolled out of the opening in the ceiling, smoke spewing from a hole in the top.

Ridge fired at a shadow moving above the vent. He didn't know if he hit the person, but nobody else came through after the canister.

Tolemek's eyes widened when he spotted the smoke, or maybe when he *smelled* it—his nostrils flared and he grabbed Apex. "We have to move."

Apex shoved him away, refusing to leave the protection of the column. "People are shooting at us!"

A barrage of shots came from the lift area, punctuating his words. Some men had stayed inside, jamming the doors open somehow, and others had lunged behind two columns closet to the lift.

"Get away from that smoke," Ridge yelled. "Sardelle said it's deadly."

A bullet slammed into the back of his desk, and he had to look away before seeing if they complied. The impact hurled one of the drawers onto the ground and made him rethink his hiding spot. More bullets skipped off the floor all around him. He didn't know if he was going to get a chance to run to a new position. He couldn't even lift his head to check on Apex and Tolemek.

Another round slammed into the back of the desk, this one cutting a hole. If he had been hunkering closer, it might have cut a hole in *him*.

Ridge scooted back, bumping the drawer that had fallen out. Glass clinked. There were several vials and flasks full of colored liquids. He grabbed a few and lofted them over the top of the desk toward the lift. He had no idea what they did, but he doubted the guards did, either. Maybe they would get worried and run back to the lift, or maybe he would get lucky, and the mixture of chemicals breaking onto the floor out there would smoke and hiss terrifyingly.

A whiff of the red stuff that had been thrown through the vent reached him, and his stomach clenched. Sardelle's warning thundered to the front of his mind again. He would *have* to risk changing positions now. The shots coming from the lift had slowed down. Maybe his chemical cocktail was doing something. Or maybe the guards were readying themselves for a more deadly attack. Those two men with rocket launchers filled his mind.

Ridge rushed to reload his rifle, then threw the rest of the drawer's contents and burst out from behind the desk. He fired as he ran, and by luck struck one of the men holding a launcher. The Cofah had just stepped out of the lift with the weapon. The bullet took him in the neck, but it was too late. He had already fired.

A floor-shaking boom erupted from the desk Ridge had been hiding behind. The rocket obliterated the metal frame and all of its contents. Even though he had left the position, Ridge still felt the force of the explosion. It slammed into his back, and he caromed off a column, then stumbled to the floor. He scrambled behind a bookcase before the Cofah figured out where he had gone. Paper confetti flooded the air, floating down everywhere. It was all that remained of the books and papers on that desk.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Ridge rolled into a crouch on the other side of his hiding spot and fired several rounds. He was closer to the lift now and could see the men behind the columns. They were facing the explosion—or maybe Apex and Tolemek were occupying their attention—so Ridge had a good shot at them. He fired twice, taking two men in the legs—those vests they had on were blocking shots to the torso—before the others adjusted their position behind the column and started shooting back at him.

He ducked back behind the bookcase. There were two pieces of furniture back to back; he hoped they would be thick enough to stop bullets. A queasiness had come over him, and he fought against a growing urge to heave the contents of his stomach.

Get back. To the wall. As far as you can. Away from the lift and those men. That was Jaxi's voice, not Sardelle's, but Ridge obeyed it, nonetheless.

Using the bookcases to block his movement, he crawled between two workstations, around a column, and kept going until he reached the wall. At the same time, a second explosion rocked the laboratory. Even though Ridge wasn't as close to this one, it still hammered him into the wall. Furniture toppled down all around him, with glass shattering and breaking as it landed on the floor amid books, drawers, and the gods knew what else.

Ridge scrunched up against the wall, holding his breath, not sure if something toxic might be flowing out of those broken containers—and not sure he should be breathing the smoke in the air, either. Parts of the ceiling had fallen, too, and he spotted cracks in the column nearest him.

It's all right now. I'm communicating with Tolemek too. He's the one who threw that explosive.

"Zirkander," came Tolemek's voice, weary and pained. "You better be alive. I need someone to help me find my dragons-cursed bag before your man dies." A slam sounded, a desk being kicked, and Tolemek cursed and started shoving more things around.

Ridge pushed to his feet, but he didn't make it far before the nauseating feeling that had assailed him before returned fivefold. He clutched his belly and tried to calm his system, but his gut roiled

anyway. He dropped his rifle and vomited all over the floor before he managed to stumble away from the wall.

He forced himself to run, passing bodies—and body parts—strewn all over the floor. His beleaguered stomach threatened another round of spasms. On the floor behind a column, there was an inert form that wasn't wearing the crimson Cofah uniform, but the gray and blue of Iskandia. Ridge forced aside his sickness to run to Apex, afraid he was already dead.

Apex's uniform jacket was covered in vomit, his limbs were trembling, his face was drenched with sweat, and saliva beaded at the corners of his mouth. Unfocused eyes stared at the ceiling, and his weak breaths rasped in his throat. Ridge stumbled to his knees beside him and clutched his arm.

"Apex," he said. Uselessly. What more could he say that wouldn't be a lie? Ridge knew a dying man when he saw one.

"I don't know why everyone's vomiting," came Tolemek's voice from a toppled bookcase a few feet away. He heaved the obstacle away and dragged out his bag. "Some Cofah tinkering with the formula."

"Can we discuss that later?" Ridge snapped, annoyed with the science analysis. If Apex had another minute, he'd be shocked. He needed… what, Ridge didn't know. "You know what this gunk is? Can you do anything?"

Apex blinked, his eyes focusing on Ridge. Tears welled in them. "Should… should've listened," he whispered, then took a deep breath, or tried to. He didn't seem to be getting the air he needed.

Tolemek dropped down on the other side of Apex, digging in his bag. He pulled out a jar and a syringe. Ridge held his breath, hoping that was some kind of cure—and that it could be delivered fast enough. And that it would work. What did that mean? A Cofah tinkering with the formula? Was this something of his? That same death toxin that had almost been unleashed in the capital?

With quick, efficient movements, Tolemek filled the syringe from the jar. "I'm not going to try to make a deal with you, Zirkander, but I'd appreciate it if you keep this piranha off me in exchange for this." He pulled out a knife, cut open Apex's trouser leg, and jabbed the needle into his thigh.

Apex didn't react. He didn't even seem aware of them anymore.

"What is it?" Ridge whispered, watching his lieutenant's face, hoping this was some miracle cure.

"Atropine. I make it in my lab from the deadly nightshade plant."

"*Nightshade*?" Ridge lunged across Apex and grabbed Tolemek by the shirtfront. "I thought you had a cure, not a poison." Was all of this just to end Apex's suffering? Seven gods, Ridge could have done *that*

with a knife.

"Relax, Zirkander. It's not enough to poison him." Tolemek picked up Apex's wrist, his fingers resting on the pulse. He watched the lieutenant's face and ignored the death grip Ridge had on his shirt. "Even if the Cofah altered the formula, it's still an organophosphate. The symptoms match up, and I can tell from the abbreviated whiff I got."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." But Ridge let go of Tolemek's shirt. Apex's eyes had widened, and his breathing had grown less raspy.

"That's what you get for making paper fliers during your science classes."

"I—"

Movement behind Tolemek drew his eye. A crimson-cloaked figure was dropping down from the ceiling, not ten feet away.

Ridge remembered his rifle—back on the floor where he had left it when he had been vomiting and worrying about Apex. He clawed at the pistol on his belt, but the guard already had a weapon pointed at him. Ridge threw himself to the side and whipped his own gun out at the same time as a shot fired.

He expected a bullet to the chest, but it was the guard who reacted, stumbling forward, then spinning around. Another shot fired. The man tumbled to the floor. Ridge raised his aim to a second guard, who had been in the middle of lowering himself from the vent. He'd paused at the sounds of gunfire, and started to pull himself back up, but Ridge caught him first. His shot struck the man in the side, and the man dropped like a brick. Two more shots—not his—were fired from somewhere behind the Cofah men, both thudding into the figures on the floor. The guards didn't move after that.

Ridge stood, his pistol in his hand, not sure whether he was about to welcome an ally… or something else.

A figure in a torn crimson uniform stepped out from behind a pillar, a Cofah shotgun in one hand and a pistol in the other. Ridge tensed. But the person spoke at the same time as he recognized the bruised, swollen face.

"I wasn't expecting you here, Colonel," Kaika said.

Ridge swallowed. "We weren't expecting you, either."

Kaika looked fierce and scary at the same time as she looked battered almost beyond recognition and wearier than death. "We thought… they said you were dead, and we saw bodies hanging by the door. Wearing your uniforms."

"Yeah." Her eyes closed and she took a shuddering breath. "Nowon is dead. I couldn't figure out how to get into the vault. I questioned a couple of guards and scientists, but they didn't know. They kept

saying the woman who knows isn't here. I've been hiding out—I think they thought I was dead, too… after that acid trap thing… whatever it was. But I tricked the scientist who tripped it, pushed her in, then stuck her in my uniform." She was walking toward them as she spoke, her steps slow, her shoulders slumped, as if firing those last shots had taken all of her meager reserves.

Ridge lifted an arm, not knowing if she wanted a hug, but she damned well looked like she needed one. So did Apex, whenever he was strong enough to sit up and receive one.

Kaika slumped against his side, accepting the arm around her shoulders. "I've been skulking around for days, using what I could find —what I could recognize—to make explosives."

"Explosives?" Maybe someone else had his plan in mind.

"I thought if I couldn't get to the dragon blood, I could blow up the mountain so nobody else could, either." She looked at him warily. "The king… I mean, I didn't talk to him directly, but Nowon said he didn't want any of this to survive to be used against us." She waved toward the laboratories. "And I don't think he knew about half of what they've been doing here. Or even a tenth. Are you going to countermand that? Because I was about to light the fuse, but I heard the gunshots and thought—I figured it must be you people. Who else knows this place is here? I didn't want to blow you up."

"Those are the kinds of words I like to hear from my officers. My enemies too. Listen, Sardelle and the others have the dragon blood." Ridge pointed at the lift, in the direction he believed them to be. "So let's not blow this place up yet. If we can get to them, we can bring back some samples for the king and our own scientists." He tilted his chin toward Tolemek, who was helping Apex sit up. Apex still looked like something an alley cat had coughed up, but some of the color had returned to his face. "*Then* we can blow up the mountain."

"Let's make sure we figure out how to get out before considering that route," Tolemek said.

"Welcome back, Captain," Apex said. "You look awful."

Kaika looked at Ridge and jerked a thumb at Apex. "The man knows he's sitting in his own puke, piss, and shit, right? I can't possibly look worse than him."

Apex's face paled a little again as he looked down at himself. Ridge was glad he had only caught the tail end of that smoke—and had ejected most of his own vomit onto the floor. He had notions of a romantic reunion with Sardelle, and that was always easier without puke plastered on one's shirt.

"He does now." Ridge nudged Apex's boot with his own. "Hope you brought a change of clothing, man. Otherwise we might not let you into our hot air balloon."

Apex's expression grew even more mortified. Good. If he could manage to look mortified, he couldn't feel that awful anymore.

Ridge?

Here. We've met some of your ceiling rats. And their smoke bombs.

Did everyone make it?

Thanks to Tolemek, yes.

Good. We've separated the vials into bundles for different people to carry. Should we try to reach you or wait to be rescued?

Ridge snorted softly. *Somehow I doubt the people who figured out how to get into that vault are truly in need of rescuing.*

That depends on whether you want Jaxi randomly melting walls.

She can melt the whole place if she wants. Oh, wait. "Where are the explosives, Kaika?" Ridge asked.

The captain pointed toward the floor. "Lowest level, support columns. I've never done a cone-shaped building before—" she outlined the mountain form with her hands, "—but I found the architectural blueprints, so I think it'll go down smoothly."

Ridge wondered if he and the others had been battling those statues on the ground floor without ever noticing explosives nestled in the shadows of the walls.

"How do you get them to go off all at once?" Tolemek asked. He had repacked his bag, slung it over his shoulder, and appeared ready to march.

"I found some timers I could modify to use. I haven't set them yet. The lift is watched so I haven't been using that. Been climbing all over this place. I haven't slept in… I don't even know what day this is."

Ridge clasped her shoulder. "The day we get out of here and go home. Would you be terribly offended if I sent you back down there to set those timers now?"

Kaika slumped a little, but she said, "No, sir."

"Can you give us… three hours?" Ridge thought they could find the others and the way out Sardelle had mentioned in less than two, but couldn't imagine there was a need to make it close. Other than the fact that the Cofah might find the explosives if they were given more time to do so.

"Most I can do with the clocks I found is an hour," Kaika said.

"Oh." That *would* be close.

Sardelle? he asked, hoping she might be monitoring his mind or whatever it was telepaths did to communicate with non-telepaths, but he didn't receive a response. Guess she wasn't obsessed enough with him to want to stalk his every waking thought. Probably a good thing for his sanity. And hers.

"Sir?" Kaika said. "This is why I was sent. Nowon was supposed to get the blood, and I was supposed to destroy the research facility." She

gazed past him, at the wrecked furniture and lab, or maybe at nothing. “I can stay behind to give the rest of you more time to escape.”

And get herself killed if she couldn’t get out in time, if not in the explosion then in trying to pick a path through those geysers.

“No, we’ll all get out of here together,” Ridge said. “Set the timers, and meet us at the top floor. There are hot air balloons that we can launch from there to escape.” Or so he had been told. He hoped Jaxi’s assessment of the mountain proved accurate, or they would all be in trouble.

“Yes, sir.”

“I can give you some company if you’d like, Kaika. To watch your back while you work.” As soon as he said it, he realized *he* would have to be that company. Tolemek might be needed to burn a way in to free the others, and Apex would be lucky to walk out of here of his own accord.

Or so Ridge thought. Apex pushed himself to his feet, using his rifle for support. “I can help her, sir. I’ll, ah, grab one of these Cofah uniforms since mine is in… disrepair. We might be less likely to be shot if we look like them anyway.”

Ridge lifted his eyebrows, wondering if Kaika would want someone who had almost been dead ten minutes earlier. He wouldn’t have much energy.

From the way her lips screwed up thoughtfully—or was that dubiously?—Kaika was mulling over the same thing. By this point, she might be desperate enough for company to take him anyway. Ridge felt bad about sending her down to the bowels of the mountain again, but she was the demolitions expert. He wouldn’t know where to begin to set the charges.

Kaika finally thumped Apex on the shoulder. “Fine. You can hold my rifle while I tie knots. Let’s go.”

Surprisingly, Apex perked up at this offer. Or maybe it wasn’t so surprising. Ridge remembered that Kaika had kissed him the last time they had seen each other. Duck, who had been more openly ogling her, hadn’t received similar treatment.

Before heading away, Apex looked back at Tolemek. “Thanks for the help.”

It wasn’t exactly a peace offering or an apology for all the digs he had taken at Tolemek, but maybe it was a start. Ridge didn’t know, but he hoped so. He didn’t want to have to reassign Apex to the other side of the continent to ensure he wouldn’t come in contact with his nemesis.

“You’re welcome,” Tolemek said.

“Well, Tee,” Ridge said as the other two walked away, “shall we

find our ladies?”

Tolemek looked up at the open duct access point. “Yes. It was foolish of us to misplace them in the first place.”

“I agree.”

Chapter 16

Sardelle waited underneath a vent opening while Duck lugged out the last bag of vials they had packed. They had done their best to insulate them, but glass still clinked when he set it down. Sardelle hated the idea of the containers breaking and spilling their precious contents, but that was better than having the blood used to power weapons that would be employed against Iskandia.

Ahn was up in the duct system already, searching for a route that would get them to the other side of the lift. A couple of shots fired somewhere above and in the distance. Ahn? Taking care of the Cofah? Or someone shooting at her?

"I should have gone up there with her," Duck said.

Sardelle eyed his tall form. "You'll be lucky if you fit. She's the logical one to squirm around in there."

"I know but—"

Soft grunts and bangs drifted down from the ducts. When Ahn had shimmied into the system, she hadn't made a sound. And those were male grunts.

Sardelle backed away, and Duck did, too, raising his rifle toward the hole. Fearing more Cofah with smoke canisters, she reached out mentally to inspect the intruders. The two men jostling their way through the ducts toward them were familiar.

"It's Ridge and Tolemek," she said, placing a hand on Duck's arm so he would lower the weapon.

An upside-down head and a dirt-smudged scarf dangled through the vent hole. The face, when it turned to search the chamber, was equally dirt-smudged.

"Over here." Sardelle walked over and smiled up at Ridge. "Did you cross paths with Ahn?"

"Not yet. We've had to deal with a couple of Cofah scampering around in here, though. We found a way up to the top level too. Want to hand me those bags? Then we'll pull you up."

"You're not going to come down for a reunion hug? I thought you were dead, you know." Despite her teasing, Sardelle could sense the urgency emanating from him—he had barely returned her smile—and

picked up a bag.

"We have less than an hour to get out of here before the mountain blows up." Ridge caught the first bag when she carefully tossed it up to him. He pulled it through, then his head and arms came down for another. "Though if you can jump high, I imagine we can manage a quick upside-down kiss."

"How romantic." Forgoing the jump-kiss, Sardelle tossed him a second bag.

Duck came over and picked up the next one. "Good to see you, sir. I've been keeping your lady safe in your absence."

"Oh?" Ridge shifted out of view to push the bags back behind him. Tolemek grunted and said something too muffled to make out. "Is that why you're so beat up, and she's unscathed?" Ridge added when he returned for the next bag.

"Yes, sir." Duck winked at Sardelle.

She was still amused that sharing a vomiting experience with the man was what had caused him to accept her into the group.

This time, when Ridge disappeared into the duct with a bag, more time passed before his head reappeared.

"Problem, sir?" Duck asked.

A third person had joined them in the duct. Ah, Ahn. Good.

"I just lost my helper to, judging by the noises, some kind of kissing session." Ridge thumped a hand against the side of the duct. "We're on a schedule, you two."

"I see Tolemek is versed in the ways of romantic reunions," Sardelle observed.

A quick exchange of words followed, then Ridge returned to the opening, waving for another bag. "Actually, I think Ahn pounced on *him*." He wriggled his eyebrows at her.

Before she could contemplate a response, a loud, deep gong sounded in the depths of the mountain, the echoes reverberating through the walls. Ridge's suggestive expression turned into a grimace.

"Alarm system?" Sardelle guessed.

"I don't know, but we have even more reason to hurry." Ridge accepted the last bag from Duck, then scooted back so the lieutenant could run, jump, and catch the lip of the duct. Barely. It wasn't a low ceiling.

Ridge pulled him in, but Duck must have lost half the skin off his chest in the process.

Due to the confines of the narrow shaft up there, it took some rearranging before there was room for Sardelle. Bangs and thumps drifted down—the alarm had stopped after three bongs, so she heard them well. It sounded like Duck was trying to push past someone else,

so Ridge could return to give her a hand.

Sardelle summoned her reserves to give herself a magical boost to duplicate Duck's athletic feat. She caught the lip of the hole at the same time as Ridge's head reappeared. His eyes widened, but he caught her hand and pulled her in. Thanks to being lighter than Duck, it went more smoothly—she only lost a quarter of the skin on her chest as she was pulled onto her belly in the duct.

She clunked her head and found that she couldn't rise higher than her elbows. How the bigger men were navigating around up here, she couldn't imagine.

"This way," Ridge said, and backed away from her.

It was dark, but Sardelle followed the men's thumps and grunts easily enough. They reached an intersection, and Ridge was able to turn around and face forward. She kept his boots within reach. Nobody had given her a bag to carry, but she could hear the clinking of glass from ahead. She kept herself from nagging at them to be careful—they knew it was a precious load they carried.

"Ridge, Apex isn't with you?" Sardelle asked softly, realizing he was the only one in their group who wasn't in the ducts ahead of her. She hoped they hadn't lost him, but if he had been injured, and there was a possibility that he wasn't dead and that she might help…

"He's with Kaika, down on the first floor."

"Kaika? Wasn't she…?"

"Apparently she switched uniforms with someone and tricked the Cofah into believing she was the scorched and disfigured one. That was Nowon we saw, though. Unfortunately." A sense of guilt came with his words, of failure.

Sardelle wanted to comfort him, to remind him that they at least had the blood the king had sent him for, but that would have to wait until they escaped this mountain. He had said there wasn't much time. And if the team was split up, did that mean they needed to retrieve the others before finding those balloons? Wait, he hadn't said *why* they didn't have much time.

"Why aren't they with you?" she asked. "And why do we have less than an hour?"

"They're setting explosives," Ridge said, wariness in his tone.

When he had asked about the Galmok Mountain demolition, Sardelle had been glad she couldn't give him an answer. She wondered how many guards and scientists were left alive in here. The Cofah had been trying to kill them all along, so she shouldn't argue for saving their lives, but this wasn't Iskandia. She and the others had invaded another nation to steal resources and destroy work. Even if it was in the name of protecting her own people, it was hard to justify murder.

“Do they have enough to matter?” Sardelle wondered. “To bring down the mountain?”

“I don’t know, but that’s what Kaika’s specialty is, so if it can be done, she’ll know how.”

“I see.” And was that why the woman had been on the team to start with? Had blowing up this facility always been the plan?

We have a problem, Jaxi announced.

That gonging? It hadn’t returned, but it had been loud enough that Sardelle believed it would have been audible all over the mountain.

I think that was just a warning bell to tell the scientists to leave or hide somewhere safe. The problem is the Cofah airships heading in this direction.

What? How many? Sardelle mashed her knuckles against Ridge’s boots—he had stopped.

“We’re going up here,” Ridge said.

From the scuffs and clanks, the others were already heading up some vertical shaft.

“Wait,” Sardelle caught his ankle. “The Cofah are coming. Airships.”

“You can sense them? How many?”

“They’re not in my range yet, but…” *Jaxi?*

They’re about ten miles away, at least four of them. Big heavily armed military warships. It won’t take them long to cover that distance by air.

“At least four, Jaxi says. Coming fast.”

“All right,” Ridge said. “Let’s get up to the top and we’ll assess the situation.”

Sardelle let go of his boot, so he could climb. He didn’t sound as frantic as this new information made Sardelle feel. Maybe because he didn’t know that she didn’t have the mental energy to muster much more in the way of magic, and Jaxi was exhausted too. She would have to tell him.

As soon as she tried to climb the vertical duct, she found out her physical energy was depleted as well. Asking for help would have been embarrassing, though, and she didn’t see how Ridge could provide it anyway. She jammed her back against the side and pushed herself up with her legs, inch by inch. A clank came from somewhere above, and a hint of light filtered down. She reached up, hoping to find the top. A hand clasped hers and pulled her up, until another hand could grab her belt and hoist her sideways into a new duct, her sword scabbard scraping and banging every inch of the way.

Not dignified, but at least nobody could see her in the darkness. “Guess there was a reason I wore a shirt and trousers instead of a dress,” she muttered.

“Handholds are useful.” Ridge shifted around, blocking the light for

a moment. “We’re under the floor of the top level. The exit is just ahead.”

His words sounded encouraging. Maybe he had sensed her weariness—or had heard her grunts of distress—and knew she needed encouragement. She crawled after him until she could stick her head through a vent low on a wall in a big room with a high pyramid-shaped ceiling. They had indeed reached the top of the mountain. Four hot air balloon baskets rested in the center of the room, though it wasn’t yet apparent how they might escape the confines of the mountain.

Someone had lit lanterns, and Ahn and Duck were already unfolding one of the balloons. It would take time to heat up the air to fly one of the craft, time they might not have.

“I want all four of them readied,” Ridge said from the perimeter of the room. He was jogging around, examining the wall and touching things. There weren’t any windows, so only the wan flames of the lanterns brightened the space. “Tee, bring your big brain over here, will you? There has to be a way to open up the roof or some kind of big door. Something to let these out.”

Sardelle propped her hands on her hips and tried to *see* the contours and cracks of the roof with more than her eyes.

“Why are we getting all of them ready?” Duck asked from inside one of the baskets—he had matches out and was trying to light the burner. “And dare I state that I’ve never launched a hot air balloon, and have no idea how the balloon is supposed to get from a crumpled mass on the ground to a big bulb above the basket?”

“There’s usually some big fan that gets things started.” Ridge paused in his hunt to look around.

“Jaxi will get them inflated enough for the burners to take over,” Sardelle said.

I will?

I’m tired. I need to save a shred of energy for those Cofah airships. Not that she could imagine what she would do against all of them. Even at full strength, such a battle would be a struggle. If Ridge and his squadron had their fliers, they could attack, too, but what could anyone do from a hot air balloon? Besides be a target?

I’m tired too. I just melted a vault, remember?

Yes, but you have greater strength and stamina than I do.

Flatterer.

Sardelle smiled. *Who, me?*

Blowing up balloons is on the list of things I once deemed too lowly for someone with my skills.

Fortunately, you’ve changed your mind?

Not really.

Then we'll be stuck here when another mountain blows up, and you might have to wait another three hundred years for someone to pull you out of the rubble.

I'll blow up the balloons.

Good girl.

Amazing how one could feel a sentient sword glowering even when it was tucked away in its scabbard.

"Found something," Ridge said.

Sardelle started to join him, but nobody was working on the fourth balloon yet. She didn't know if Ridge wanted extras in the air to distract the Cofah, or if he intended to split up the team, but he had wanted them all up, and he was busy. A loud thunk sounded as he pushed an arm-sized lever into an up position.

Gears ground behind the wall, and chains rattled and clanked overhead. A whisper of warm sulfuric air wafted in from a new crack —several cracks. Sardelle had been imagining that the peak would flip open on hinges somehow, but the point of the ceiling was splitting in four directions, each quarter leaning back, opening like flower petals. Stars poked through the steam wafting across the dark sky. The geysers did not stop their cycles, even in the middle of the night.

Ridge ran over to the envelope Sardelle had started to unravel—it had been coiled up like a sleeping roll—and they laid it out together, spreading it like a picnic blanket. She smiled at him across the thin material, wishing they were setting up for a picnic someplace quiet and peaceful—and not in danger of exploding.

Hurrying, his face tense, Ridge didn't notice her look. Sardelle fought through her fatigue to pick up her speed too. As soon as the envelope had been unfolded, she willed air in to inflate it part way. Ridge turned the burner up to high, angling it toward the sideways mouth of the partially inflated balloon. Sardelle pushed in more air, until it started to rise, and the burner could continue to heat the air inside on its own.

The airships are six miles away now.

Sardelle stared around the room, noting everyone's progress. Could they possibly escape before the airships were close enough to spot them? If any of the balloons were spotted at all, the Cofah could easily catch them and shoot them down. Possibly right over that field of geysers and scorching pools.

Help Ahn, please, Jaxi. Hers is ready to go. Sardelle turned her own attention to the balloon Tolemek had spread. Duck was still struggling to lay out his.

"Hurry up, Kaika," Ridge muttered. "I'll be right back. Need to find something to anchor this down until we're ready to let it go. Or—" he drummed his fingers on his thigh, "—maybe we should just let it go as

soon as it can. Get the Cofah chasing after a dummy." He met Sardelle's eyes. "How close are they now? Are they within sight of the mountain?"

"Soon, but not yet. They're six miles out."

The captain and lieutenant are coming.

Thanks, Jaxi.

"It's occurring to me," Ridge said as he ran over to help Duck with his balloon, "that the lab never was reinforced with extra troops, or not many at any rate. Maybe that airship dropped off a few, but then it must have gone south for reinforcements, and now it's back with friends, friends with orders to utterly destroy us."

"We have all of their dragon blood," Tolemek said. "Can't we use it against them?"

"If you know how to program it to do something special—like blowing up Cofah airships—I'm not going to object to that."

Sardelle gripped a nearby basket for support, then channeled air into Duck's balloon. Her head throbbed, stabbing the backs of her eyes with each beat of her heart. She feared she wouldn't be able to do anything against the Cofah when they finally appeared.

"The blood itself couldn't do that. I'd have to find some of those rockets and figure out how to reprogram them." Tolemek glanced at the vent they had come out of.

"There's no time for going back down and tinkering," Ridge said. "We'll have to simply hope we can escape before the Cofah show up." He paced over to the next balloon, thumping his fist against his thigh. "And before the mountain blows up. Kaika, Apex, where *are* you two? Sardelle, can you tell if they've run into trouble?"

"Jaxi says they're coming."

"They—"

A clunk-thunk came from the middle of the room, a trapdoor being thrown open.

"…not my fault the lift doesn't come up to this floor," came Kaika's voice before her head appeared.

"I didn't say it was, but you might have informed me we were choosing an alternate route before I ran into those two guards," Apex said.

"You were fine. They were too busy fleeing the building after that gong went off to waste time noticing you."

"One punched me in the eye. I think that fits the definition of noticing."

Kaika searched the room, spotted Ridge, and jogged up to him, giving him a smart salute, a gesture that seemed odd coming from someone dressed in a red Cofah uniform. She looked like she had been punched in the eye a few times too.

“The explosives are set, sir, and were you aware of how whiny some of your pilots are?”

Apex stopped a few paces away and folded his arms over his chest with dramatic flair. He, too, had switched to a Cofah uniform at some point.

“Only some?” Ridge asked and winked at Apex. “You’re looking better. Arguing with a woman must agree with you.”

Apex sniffed. “Really, sir.”

The basket Sardelle was leaning against started bumping across the ground. The balloon had filled and was ready to drift up through the big opening in the ceiling. “Ridge, are we riding out in this one, or letting it go?” The basket tried to lift up, and she had to lean on the rim to push it back down.

Ridge looked at the other balloons, which ranged from a quarter to three quarters inflated. “How long until the explosives go off, Kaika?”

She looked at a pocket watch. “Ten minutes, thirty seven seconds.”

Sardelle pushed down on the basket with more of her weight. In a few more seconds it would be dragging her up with it no matter how hard she pushed.

“Are the Cofah within sight yet, Sardelle?” Ridge asked. “Gather your gear, everyone. Kaika, Apex, grab a couple of those bags.”

They’re… yes. On the horizon.

“They’re on the horizon,” Sardelle said.

Kaika’s brow wrinkled. She hadn’t been in the camp when Ridge had decided to share Sardelle’s talent with the group. Sardelle wasn’t about to try and explain things now.

“Too late to slip out without being spotted then.” Ridge gestured for Sardelle to scoot back. “Let that one go. With luck, they’ll follow it. We’ll take… that roomy one over there.”

“Should we consider splitting up, sir?” Ahn asked.

“Sardelle, are you and Jaxi going to be able to give us any magical defenses, and if so would it be easier to protect us if we’re all together?”

“I’ve got our defenses right here, sir.” Ahn thumped the side of her rifle, which she had managed to drag all through the ducts with her.

“I’ll be counting on that defense, too,” Ridge said.

“All together.” Sardelle didn’t want to promise a lot in the way of “magical defenses.” Her main thought was to get them past the geysers so they could drop to the ground, where the trees might hide them from aerial assault. Might. She would hope the Cofah didn’t have any of those rockets Ridge had encountered, with the ability to magically find their target. “But in theory, Jaxi can keep an eye on one basket, and I can watch the other.” She opened her mouth—this would be the time to tell him that she didn’t have much energy left—

but he spoke first.

"She doesn't mind you volunteering her for duties?" Ridge waved for everyone to pack their bags into the two larger baskets.

"She minded being volunteered for blowing up balloons. She gets less perturbed when asked to send streams of flame at the Cofah."

That's the truth.

I know you well.

Tolemek, Ahn, and Duck climbed into one balloon, and Ridge, Sardelle, Kaika, and Apex headed for the other. Sardelle wanted to hop in as smoothly as the men, but her limbs were as weary as her mind. She had to try twice to throw her leg over the rim of the basket, and Ridge ended up catching her in the middle of the second try and pulling her in beside him.

He had given the other half of the team more of the bags of their invaluable cargo. Because they had fewer people, or did he put more stock in Ahn's marksmanship than Sardelle's ability to defend a basket, right now?

Maybe he can tell how tired you are, even without you saying anything.

You're tired too.

I didn't say I wasn't. But Ridge doesn't monitor me as stringently as he does you.

A cannon boomed in the distance.

The first two airships are veering off after that balloon, Jaxi said. *One fired a warning shot.*

They don't think it could be their own people?

No, because they can't see anyone. They think someone might be hiding in it.

Let's hope they're tired of checking by the time we do that.

"How much longer, Kaika?" Ridge was gazing toward the stars, listening to the booms outside of the mountain, but he didn't sound worried.

Sardelle wished she could emulate that sense of calm. As Kaika checked her watch again, the second balloon, with nothing inside the basket to weigh it down, took off. "Six minutes, forty-three seconds."

"Hm," Ridge said.

"We may not want to cut it too close," Sardelle said. "I'm not that certain of my ability to protect the balloon from shrapnel and whatever else comes flying out of this mountain."

Kaika's eyebrows lowered. "It'll be a *controlled* explosion with gravity drawing the mountain down and in on itself. There's no way I could have found enough explosives for flying shrapnel, even if that were the desired result."

"My apologies." Sardelle watched as the second balloon bumped against the sloping ceiling but eventually drifted upward toward the

exit. “Explosives aren’t my specialty.” They hadn’t been a common occurrence in her time, unless one counted fireworks at festivals.

“I wouldn’t have minded something with shrapnel,” Ridge said wistfully, “something that might catch a few of those airships with the force of the explosion, but this will be safer for us.”

The basket wobbled beneath Sardelle’s feet.

“We’re going up first,” Apex said. He didn’t sound like he was certain that was a good thing.

“Duck down when you get up there,” Ridge said. “Everyone. We’ll hope that after blowing up two empty baskets, they’ll be less certain anything is loaded in these two.”

The basket tipped, then rose from the floor. Sardelle sank down before they reached the ceiling hole. Her legs thanked her. Ridge looked down at her, his eyes gentle with concern, then he cut out their lantern, and his face disappeared into shadow.

He crouched down beside her and took her hand. “How are you feeling? You look pale and tired.”

“Not sexy and interestingly wan? I seem to remember some fairy tale where a sorceress beleaguered after thirty days and thirty nights of fighting back the Cofah still managed to look interestingly wan, enough so that she attracted the eye of a dragon.”

“Your people had strange fairy tales.”

Apex and Kaika knelt down so their heads would be below the rim. Someone bumped Sardelle’s knee, but she was too tired to adjust her position.

She couldn’t see the hole in the ceiling, not with the bulging envelope above them, but knew from the ripples coursing down to the basket that the balloon was already subject to the breeze.

Sardelle gripped Ridge’s arm and leaned her head against his shoulder, even though they probably only had a minute—she could sense the airships out there. The two that had gone after the first balloon had already taken it down, and they were heading toward the mountain. The other pair of airships had fired at the second balloon, demolishing the basket, but hadn’t veered off course to follow it down into the geysers. Water spit and erupted somewhere nearby, and the sulfur stink in the air increased.

We might die in the next twenty minutes, Jaxi.

Speak for yourself. I’m living forever.

You don’t think you’d melt if you fell into one of those geysers?

Of course not. Jaxi paused thoughtfully. *I might rust, though. That would be unpleasant.*

So, being shot down would be a bad time for all.

The basket cleared the mountain, but Sardelle couldn’t see much from the floor of it. A few stars. Steam.

Ridge was crouching rather than sitting, as if he would spring up to defend them somehow.

"You've been through everything I have," Sardelle murmured, patting his thigh. "Yet you seem like you could march another twenty miles while carrying your flier on your back. If there were female dragons around, I'd have to worry about you attracting one."

"Your mind is on dragons tonight."

"I can't imagine why."

They're coming our way. Two ships.

"Jaxi says two ships are coming to check us out." Sardelle didn't move away from Ridge, but she did take a deep breath and pull in her focus. "I'll do my best to shield us. Bullets, I can handle. I'm uncertain about cannonballs right now."

"What about rockets?" Ridge asked.

"I'm even less certain about those."

At first, she tried to wrap her shield around the entire balloon and basket ensemble, but it was like trying to stretch tissue paper. Her efforts ripped and tattered, leaving giant holes.

Focus on the basket. The balloon can take a few holes.

Sardelle nodded at Jaxi's advice. *I'm going to have to.*

I'll shield the other one. Unfortunately, I don't think I can manage any gouts of flame at the same time.

We just need to escape.

"Sir," Kaika said, "what are you and her talking about? Or… do I want to know?"

"Probably not, Captain. But I can explain later."

The wind caught the balloon, and it drifted away from the mountaintop, carrying them north, toward the *real* mountains.

"Time, Captain?" Ridge lifted a hand toward the lip of the basket but caught himself. He doubtlessly wanted to poke his head up to check on the other half of their team, but on the chance the Cofah were thinking of dismissing them, he dared not risk it.

"One minute, thirty-seven seconds."

For the first time, Ridge shifted his weight, a hint of unease escaping his otherwise calm facade. Sardelle was so busy focusing on maintaining her shield, she barely registered it. Gurgles came from below, and a geyser erupted twenty meters to the side of them. Why couldn't one erupt under one of those airships? They were probably too high up for it to matter, though.

A hiss-thud came from the nearest Cofah vessel, and the unexpectedness of the noise broke through Sardelle's concentration. That was a different sound than the cannons made. "Is that—"

Ridge stood up, his rifle in hand. "A rocket."

Sardelle tracked it with her senses. It was heading straight for

them.

Jaxi—

Before she could get out her request, a second hiss-thud came from the same ship. This rocket was aiming at Ahn and Tolemek's balloon.

Take care of them, she thought, then threw every shred of energy she had into shoring up the shield on the side closest to the rocket. She tried to increase the area to protect the balloon as well, but she was straining, and the entire ethereal construct threatened to collapse.

The rocket blasted against her barrier and exploded. Yellow and orange light flared so brightly that it stung her eyes even down in the basket. She expected the force of the explosion to shred the balloon into confetti and hurl them all into the scalding pools below, but the basket scarcely moved.

Thanks, she told Jaxi, knowing she'd had help.

She didn't get a response. Sardelle knelt up to look over the rim and touched Jaxi's hilt at her waist. It was so hot it almost burned her hand. Another flare of light burst into the night sky, almost blinding her. The other balloon. Dread and guilt threatened her equilibrium. Had Jaxi left them undefended in order to save Sardelle?

No, I blew up the second rocket before it reached them. That's better than buffering the explosion. But I don't know how many more I can handle. Those airships are getting ready to throw their whole arsenal at us.

Sardelle could see the Cofah craft now, and they weren't nearly so far away as she wished. The weak wind wasn't moving the hot air balloon anywhere fast. Seven gods, she should have been trying to push the balloons along rather than shielding them. No, she dared not let up on the barrier. She rubbed at her sweaty face and gritty eyes. She wasn't sure if the black spots floating through her vision were aftereffects from seeing that explosion or were a more worrisome side effect of overexertion. The air did seem thin and not nearly substantial enough for her lungs at the moment.

In the other balloon, which had risen to the same height as Sardelle's, Ahn raised her rifle, targeting some Cofah gunner on one of the ships.

"No," Sardelle called, able to sense Jaxi's shield around the other craft. "You're protected." She wasn't sure if her voice carried, but Tolemek put a hand on Ahn's arm, forcing the weapon down, and pointed in front of them.

"More weapons firing," Kaika said, glancing at Ridge and Sardelle.

"A lot more." Ridge clenched his fist. "If I had my flier…"

The first round went toward the other balloon.

Something like a moan echoed in Sardelle's mind as Jaxi threw everything she had into blowing up the explosives before they reached the team. The next round would be aimed at this balloon, and Sardelle

didn't know if she had enough to blow anything up. Or keep the shield alive, either.

Apex eyed the ground below them, as if he knew his sorceress protector was about to fail.

It was too dark to see the geysers and mud pots, the near boiling water bubbling and gurgling in the pools, but Sardelle knew that terrain was still down there. It would take several more minutes to reach the forest and a spot where they might land… or grow tangled in the trees and climb down.

"Here it comes." Ridge gripped the edge of the balloon, his longing to do more washing over Sardelle with its intensity.

A muted boom came from the depths of the mountain. It was a weak sound next to the explosives being launched from the airships, and Sardelle almost missed it. But it made the Cofah stop firing for a moment. Gunners looked back and forth at each other, then over the railing of their ship.

Kaika leaned against the basket next to Ridge, peering down at the mountain. As far as Sardelle could tell, not much was happening.

"Did it work?" Ridge asked.

"Give it a moment." Kaika didn't sound certain. "With the lower supports removed, the levels should collapse in on themselves, under the weight of gravity."

"If we destroy that mountain," Ridge said, "and take the blood… even if it goes down with us in one of those pools, we've won a victory."

"Who's going to live to tell the king about it?" Apex grumbled.

More muted thuds came from the mountain. It was too dark to see what was going on, but the sides didn't seem to be tipping over or crumpling inward.

"Geyser," Ridge warned.

"Under us?" Sardelle leaned forward to look, but the black dots in her eyes turned into black circles, obscuring her vision. A wave of dizziness accompanied the circles. She had definitely pushed herself to the limit.

Ridge caught her arm and pointed toward the ground. "Looks like it's going to be a big one."

Even as he spoke, the funnel of water increased in size, from a few meters to over fifty. Maybe over a hundred. The phenomenon was big enough to see even in the dark. The steam and spray blocked the view of the mountain and two of the ships.

One of the outside ships could still see Sardelle's balloon, though, and orange flashes and booms announced cannonballs firing. Her shield had slipped in her distraction, and she rushed to reassemble it.

A cannonball tore through the balloon twenty feet above them. She

couldn't do anything to stop it, could only focus on the basket.

"Down," Kaika barked.

A rocket raced out of the night sky, arrowing straight at their basket.

Can't, Jaxi whispered. *The others—*

I've got it. Sardelle flung a hand in that direction, but she didn't have Jaxi's power, and it wasn't enough. At the last moment, she tried the only other thing she could think of. She turned her energy toward cutting the cables holding the basket to the balloon.

They plummeted. Someone screamed. The rocket soared by overhead, missing them. But, as they fell, she saw it arcing back toward them, angling downward, and remembered the way one had followed Ridge.

She lifted her hand one more time, this time only trying to find and destroy the vial of dragon blood instead of detonating the whole rocket. It worked. The glass burst open, spraying blood all over the inside of the projectile. She could only hope it was enough, because the blackness she had been fighting against finally swept over her. She was aware of the basket slamming into a pool, and water flying everywhere, scalding her skin, and of someone crying out in pain… and then she knew no more.

. . . . .

The basket rocked so hard it threatened to throw people out. Ridge tried to grab everyone and cover and protect Sardelle all at the same time. Scalding water sloshed in, and Kaika cried out in pain that soon turned to rage, as if she was tired of this entire mission and longed for an enemy to throttle.

"Sardelle?" Ridge whispered as the basket settled—it was floating, for the moment. He prayed to the ancient dragons that it was waterproof.

She didn't respond. He touched her cheek and found it clammy and sweaty. She was breathing. That would have to be enough for now. He had to figure out how to get them to safety and what was happening to the rest of the team.

A plop sounded a few feet away, and he squinted, wondering what had fallen down beside them. He almost laughed, realizing it was the rocket. Whatever Sardelle had done in the end, she must have deactivated it somehow. His humor was short-lived, for he knew there would be more. Possibly aiming at them right now.

He spun, nearly knocking over Apex, who was standing and gaping toward the mountain. What was left of it. The geyser had finished erupting, and the rubble was visible now, the pile only a third of the height it had been before, if that. Unfortunately, the airships remained

in the air above it. Most of them. One was flying in their direction.

"Any chance we can paddle this thing to safety?" Ridge asked, turned in the other direction again.

He spotted two things that gave him hope: the trees marking the foothills of the mountains—they weren't that far off—and the silhouette of the other hot air balloon. Since Ridge's basket was now missing its balloon, he hoped the others could get to them, and they could manage to all pile in and fly to safety. The only problem was that the Cofah only had one target now, and Sardelle couldn't defend them if she was unconscious.

Ridge hefted his rifle. They would have to do their best to defend themselves. Too bad nobody had thought to mount cannons or rocket launchers on the hot air balloons.

Waves rocked the basket. His first thought was that Tolemek's balloon had crashed, too, but it was still aloft, still a good twenty meters overhead. They looked like they were having trouble steering.

Three geysers erupted at the same time. The mud pots belched, and the most potent stench yet emanated into the air. Ripples flowed through the pool the basket was sitting in.

"Uh," Kaika said. "The mountain is steaming. What's left of it."

So much smoke was wafting from the giant rubble pile, that Ridge had no trouble seeing it, even by night. It blotted out the stars and obscured the airships, almost as if they had flown into clouds. "That's not your work?"

"Zirkander," Tolemek called down, his voice almost drowned out by the increased noise of popping bubbles and gurgling pools. "We'll be in trouble if we land. Can you catch this rope?"

"Yes," Ridge called back. He didn't see the rope, but he would find a way to catch it anyway. Then he would have to figure out how to climb it with Sardelle slung over his shoulder. Whatever had made her think he still had the energy to march twenty miles?

"There it is." Apex leaned out of the back of the basket, a hand outstretched. "Got it."

"You and Kaika go first." Ridge picked up Sardelle, careful to make sure her sword was still in its scabbard. Jaxi had certainly earned more than to be dumped into a pond and left there.

I should hope so.

Well, at least someone's conscious.

Barely. You people are taxing.

Apex grabbed one of the bags of dragon blood and shimmied up the rope. Kaika did the same and followed before he was more than halfway up. Ridge wasn't certain what was happening exactly, but the water was growing more agitated rather than less. He didn't know if Kaika's explosion could have triggered some twitchy fault down under

all these pools and geysers, but if there was about to be an earthquake —or a volcanic eruption—he didn't want to have his nose pressed against the window for it.

"Hurry, Zirkander," Tolemek called down, the urgency in his voice clear even over the noise.

He must know something Ridge only suspected at this point.

"Good luck to us," he whispered to Sardelle, gave her a kiss, then wrapped the rope around his forearm and hand a few times, hoping that would be enough. There was no way he could climb without risking dropping her. "Go," he called up. "I've got a grip."

He thought he might have to explain further, but Tolemek understood. Their balloon had already been trying to drift away. Ridge curled up his legs, letting it pull him from the basket.

But with all the weight, their balloon didn't gain any more lift. It was drifting off in the right direction, toward the trees, but the angry, bubbling water spit and sputtered right beneath Ridge's butt. He was so busy jerking his legs up and sideways—anything to keep from being burned—that he almost missed the first spews of angry orange magma bursting forth from the mound of rubble. Or maybe it was shooting up from behind it, from some new volcano thrusting out of the mire. It was too dark to tell, but whatever was happening was alarming the airships. None of them was shooting or sailing toward the hot air balloon now.

"Ouch," Ridge yelped. His trousers provided *some* protection from the hot water, but not enough. He envisioned one of those geysers blowing right under him.

"A little more altitude would not be unappreciated," Ridge called up.

He smacked into something. Hard.

"What the—" He had wrapped the rope around his arm so many times that he wasn't immediately knocked free, but the blow did send him spinning, and then a second one followed it. Something big and brushy slammed into his face. This time, he *was* knocked free, and he shouted an angry, "No!" as he fell.

He didn't land in scalding water but in cold snow, his limbs tangled with Sardelle's. She moaned but remained unconscious. He grinned, realizing they had made it to the forest. Safety. Well, maybe not. If that new volcano grew serious about erupting, who knew how far it would hurl lava and ash? Maybe the magma would be swallowed by the pools all around the area, but maybe not.

"Sir," Duck called down.

"Here." Ridge gathered up Sardelle again and floundered through the snow, trying to catch up with the balloon. He might have cursed the hapless craft earlier, but they would escape lava flows a lot more

easily from the air.

"There he is," Duck called. "We're coming down, sir. Can you meet us in that clearing?"

Ridge had no idea where "that clearing" was, but he followed the balloon, weaving through the trees and fighting snow that went up past his knees. He was stumbling by the end, and only his desire not to drop or hurt Sardelle kept him upright.

"I love you people," he called when he spotted the basket waiting for him, the craft tied down with a rope around a tree. "If I don't get court-martialed, I'll put you all in for awards." His enthusiasm grew even more heartfelt when Duck and Apex grabbed him and Sardelle, hoisting them into the basket. It was a tight fit, but he didn't care, not even when his legs collapsed and he ended up propped up against Tolemek.

"What award can I, as an expatriate civilian, expect?" Tolemek asked.

"I'll fly south to Terra Falls and pick you up the best mango turnover you've ever had."

"A fair reward. Cut that rope, Duck," Tolemek said. "As much as I'd like to observe the eruption of the long theorized but never seen Boiling Pools Volcano, I don't believe this is a safe observation station."

"Definitely not," Ridge mumbled and sank down beside Sardelle, wrapping an arm around her.

Jaxi? Can you hear me? Will she be all right?

I believe so. Humans are much frailer than swords, you know. But they're resilient too.

"I hope so," he murmured and rested his head against hers. If the rest of the team thought it was strange that he was muttering to himself, they didn't said anything.

Epilogue

When she woke up, a headache pulsing behind her eyes, Sardelle's first thought was to worry about Ridge, her second to worry about herself, and her last to wonder how going to pick up her first student had turned into such an… *event.*

Daylight had come, but it was far darker than it should have been, the sky a hazy dusty gray. It was ash, she realized, not dust. Sardelle could taste it in the cold, thick air. She should have been cold, too, but someone had wrapped her up in parkas before laying her on the frosty ground. The fur lining of Ridge's coat was snugged up protectively over her face—she could smell his masculine scent on it, though it was faint compared to the sulfur and ash in the air. She pulled the warm fur down so she could see her surroundings.

"Where are we?" she croaked, turning her head to look for people.

She was in the shadow of a cliff, surrounded by snow-clad evergreens. The crumpled black-and-gray balloon lay stretched across the snow nearby, but the basket stood empty. There should have been two hot air balloons, except she had destroyed theirs in a vain attempt to avoid that rocket. That rocket that had been arrowing straight toward them. Had she succeeded in disabling it? Had they lost anyone? Her stomach clenched when she didn't see anyone else around. Who had survived? Who hadn't? Why had they left her alone here?

Relax, genius. They're up in the cave, getting the fliers ready. I'm moderately certain Ridge is planning to come back for you. That's a nice coat, after all.

Jaxi. A wave of relief washed over Sardelle. *We made it? Everyone?*

Yes, everyone made it. The Cofah were distracted by the volcano that erupted underneath their airships. That was even better than the storm you were hoping for. We escaped in the other hot air balloon. Jaxi shared an image of Ridge, holding Sardelle while he had one hand latched onto a rope dangling from a basket. *Your soul snozzle gets an award from me for making sure I came along on that ride.*

I think he'd settle for you staying out of his head outside of emergencies.

You want him to miss out on my insightful commentary? That sounds

more like a punishment than a reward.

Sardelle pushed herself into a sitting position. *Does anyone have any injuries? I should help instead of sleeping.*

You were unconscious, not sleeping. You pushed yourself too hard.

You did too.

Yes. We should probably recruit and train more sorcerers to send along on your boyfriend's crazy missions.

That was *one of the goals here.* One they had failed at, at least for now. Sardelle hoped they could find Tolemek's sister, wherever she was. At least they hadn't failed at acquiring the dragon blood. She could still feel its power buzzing against her skin. The bags had been moved from the basket up into the cave. Everything had—except for her. Ridge must want to leave as soon as possible.

A good idea. We're not that far from Cofahre's newest volcano. Breathing that ash doesn't affect me, but I'd hate to be buried by a lava flow.

Me too. Sardelle climbed to her feet. The new position did nothing to improve her headache. She felt like a raw student again, foolishly pushing herself too hard to study for exams, then excel at exams, only to wake the morning after with a hangover greater than one would ever receive from alcoholic indulgence.

A rock clattered down from the cliff. Ridge was climbing down. He was filthy—smothered in ash and engine grease—but Sardelle welcomed him with a fierce hug when he reached the ground.

Ridge seemed surprised but quickly wrapped his arms around her. "Does this mean I'm forgiven?"

"Forgiven? For what?"

His expression grew sheepish beneath the grime. "I was up in the cave, realizing how often I snapped orders at you. Magic this. Magic that. Oh, and magic up all of the balloons, will you. I'm used to everyone who's along on my missions being under my command. I didn't mean to, ah… make you pass out."

Sardelle leaned against his chest, touched that he felt guilty, but chagrined too. There was no call for guilt from him. "I made *myself* pass out. And believe it or not, I've taken orders from military commanders before. Granted they were usually grumpy old generals, not cute and charming, if dirty, pilots…" She wiped at a smudge on his face, only to realize her thumb was just as ashy as his cheek. They all needed to find a warm pool somewhere to bathe in, preferably a tepidly warm one, not a scalding and bubbling one that stank of sulfur. "And you take me for granted a lot less than they did. You're quite tactful when you order me to magic this or magic that. You even said please once."

"Oh. Good." He was truly relieved when he hugged her again,

adding a kiss this time.

Sardelle decided to find it sweet and romantic even though their lips were coated in a layer of ash. Ridge drew back, the wryness in his eyes suggesting he had noticed the same thing, or maybe she had inadvertently shared the emotion with him. He didn't release the hug, though, and she wondered if he had been worried whether she would wake up or not.

"Is it time to go home?" she asked.

"Home, as in my house in Iskandia?"

"Yes… I dread dealing with those women who were stalking me back in the capital, but I do long for a soak in your bathtub."

"That means you've decided you'll return with me? That you want to?"

"I always wanted to, Ridge. It was just…" Sardelle gazed toward the dusty sky. "I didn't—don't—want to wreck your career."

"I know, but I've told you that that doesn't matter."

"And I, being more empathic than a rock, knew that was a half truth."

He opened his mouth, a protest on his lips, but she raised a single eyebrow, and he stopped. The sheepish expression returned. "Maybe so, but I want you *and* my career. I don't want to give up on either of you. That's why we all just nearly died to get those vials, and why we're not going home until—"

"Sir," came Apex's call from above, "Captain Kaika and I are ready to go. Do you want us to wait for you to finish canoodling or have you told us everything that you need to?"

"I'm not canoodling," Ridge called up. "I'm… negotiating a consolidation."

"If you're opting for the military definition of that word, to strengthen by rearranging the position of ground combat troops after a successful attack, I don't think your girlfriend counts as a troop unit."

"It's tedious when your young officers have a better vocabulary than you do," Ridge murmured and released Sardelle. He faced the cliff. "We're coming up, but you can take off whenever you're ready. You've got my report for the king, right?"

"The scroll filled with chicken scratches? Yes, I have it."

"You read it?"

"No, but I've seen your reports before. Your maintenance requests and shopping lists too. I trust my assessment is accurate." Apex disappeared back into the cave.

"So glad to see he's feeling better," Ridge muttered, not entirely sarcastically. He picked up the coats and started up the cliff.

Sardelle smiled and headed up the cliff, too, glad it wasn't quite

vertical. Her body ached almost as much as her head, but knowing she could rest in the flier made one more climb doable. Ridge waited for her and made sure she wasn't having trouble.

"We're not all going back to the king?" she asked when the ramifications of the men's conversation sank in. Apex and Kaika were leaving first. Meaning everyone else was going somewhere different?

"Not yet."

"Afraid to face him until he has a chance to cool his blood?"

"Not exactly. I'm sending most of the dragon blood back with Apex and Kaika. I think that and the fact that we turned the Cofah secret lab into a volcano should appease him." The way Ridge's mouth twisted suggested he wasn't certain about that, at least not insofar as his indiscretions went. "But in the event that I'm to be punished or relieved of my command again, there's one more thing I want to do before returning home, something that should further appease the king. Eliminate the source of the dragon blood—or otherwise ensure the Cofah can't get any more of it." At some point, Tolemek and Ahn must have explained the painting and the foliage in the crate to him.

"So we're going to the tropics to look for purple flowers?" Sardelle knew from experience that soldiers, even higher-ranking officers, weren't supposed to run off, assigning themselves their own missions, without permission from commanding officers, but she didn't point that out.

"Actually we're going to Mavar Island to look for my dad," Ridge said. "He's supposed to be there this winter. If anyone can identify some tropical location by its flora, it'll be him. He's spent decades exploring all around the equator. Even if he doesn't know, I'm sure he can still point us in the right direction."

"Really, Ridge," she said as she climbed onto the cave ledge. "If you wanted to take me home to meet your parents, all you had to do was say so."

"Does that mean you agree to come? If not—" his expression grew bleak, "—we can drop you off somewhere."

"Of course I'm coming. My potential student is apparently in the same place as the source of that dragon blood."

His face lightened. "Ah."

"And I agree to your offer of consolidation, military or otherwise." Knowing they would be separated in the flier, Sardelle took his hands and kissed him once more.

"Come now, sir," Apex said from the cockpit of the closest flier. "That's *definitely* canoodling."

"Jealous, Lieutenant?" Kaika asked from the rear seat. She appeared to be ready to go, several bags of the dragon blood strapped in around her. Sardelle hoped they wouldn't have to dodge any of

those unmanned attack fliers on the way out. It would be a shame to lose their samples at this point. With luck, the volcano would be distracting everyone within a couple hundred miles.

"Of course not," Apex said.

"Because if you were, I was going to offer to hold your hand on the way back."

Apex blinked a few times, but seemed too flustered to come up with a response.

Duck strolled up and handed Sardelle a skewered piece of meat on a stick. Rabbit? It was hard to tell under the layer of char.

"Thank you." She decided to add the restaurants in the capital to the list of things she was longing for.

"Knew you needed to fill your empty belly." Duck saluted Ridge. "We're ready to go, too, sir."

Duck climbed into the cockpit of his flier.

Tolemek and Ahn walked out of the depths of the cave, holding hands. There might have been some canoodling going on back there too.

"*If* the flier can get off the ground with all that unauthorized cargo on board." Ahn gave Tolemek a significant look.

"I've never studied volcanology," Tolemek said, "but I don't know when I'll get another chance to acquire fresh samples."

"Including *twenty* vials of ash?"

"Twenty-six. I assure you the combined weight is less than that of a sniper rifle."

The glowers they gave each other weren't particularly fierce.

"Looks like it's time to fly, then," Ridge said.

Apex and Kaika were already rolling toward the cave ledge. She gave a long look over her shoulder at the empty seat in Duck's flier.

"My lady." Ridge offered Sardelle his hand to give her a boost into the flier. "Your conveyance awaits."

She accepted the offer. "And my nap, I hope. Though that doesn't seem fair. You must need one as much as I do, if not more."

"Who says I won't take one?"

"Is that allowed when you're the one *flying* the craft?"

"You'll know if you wake up in the arctic instead of the tropics."

THE END

Afterword

Thank you for giving the first three *Dragon Blood* stories a read. *Patterns in the Dark*, the fourth novel in the series, is now available.

If you enjoyed these stories and have time to leave a review, I would appreciate it. If you would like to check out my other works, the full list is up on my website. If you would like a quick note when I have something new out, please sign up for my newsletter. (I occasionally send out information about contests or opportunities to snag review copies too.) For the social media fans, you can find me on Twitter, Facebook, and Google+.